Make the Most of the Holidays: A Guide to Holiday Marketing Success

Believe it or not, the time for holidays are here. What can you expect this year? The 2009 U.S. holiday spending is expected to be flat versus last year. Consumers remain cautious and the national unemployment rate is hovering at nearly 10 percent according to Deloitte’s retail group. Deloitte also expects total holiday sales to be $810 billion, excluding motor vehicle and gasoline sales, for the November through January timeframe.

You do not want to miss this opportunity. The holidays are a great time of year to bring in more business and end the year strong. We all know the holidays can be extremely hectic and competitive. You can’t afford to sit back and wait for your customers to come to you.

To help you prepare for and succeed during the busiest time of the year, VerticalResponse has compiled some holiday ideas. We want to help get you thinking and acting now, so you can start reaching customers and increasing sales.
Planning

If you haven’t already started thinking about or planning your holiday marketing communications, the time is now. According to a recent study by DoubleClick, 66% of online shoppers plan to use email to purchase during the coming holiday season. It’s important that you time your offers right. You don’t want to miss any opportunities to get the attention of your prospects and customers during the holiday season.

There are planners and procrastinators. Which do you sell to? Both? You need to understand your customer’s timing so your email promotion arrives when they’re ready to buy. Fall isn’t too early for corporate gift buyers and event planners to make winter holiday plans. Your first email campaign should arrive in time to help them make their business buying decisions. The same goes for consumers. Some make their holiday list purchases by Thanksgiving, others wait until the last minute. Be there – on time – for both.

As you think about ideas for your marketing campaigns, it is important to understand business and consumer behavior during the holidays. The more you understand your customer, the more likely your marketing will be successful.
According to NRF/BIG Research, 21% of consumers start shopping for the holidays in October, 39% start shopping in November and 17% of consumers start in the first two weeks of December. You do not want to wait until December to start your marketing. Think about planning your holiday marketing campaign in stages. They should have specific starting and ending points for your seasonal offers. Looking at your communication in stages allows you to change your marketing message as consumer shopping behavior changes. Let’s take an in-depth look at these stages and what some marketing ideas are for each of them.

**When Consumers Start Shopping for the Holidays**

- Before September: 13.4%
- September: 6%
- October: 21%
- November: 38.6%
- First 2 weeks of December: 17.3%
- Last 2 weeks of December: 4.0%

Source: NRF/BIG 2008 Research
Catching the Early Birds

These are the really organized consumers who know what they want. Some businesses start corporate gift buying early on as well. Early Birds are looking for deals and want to beat the rush. They also are looking for businesses that make it easy for them to get their shopping done.

To appeal to this crowd, start by reaching out to your loyal shoppers, or anyone that purchased from you during the same period last year. These are the people you can count on during this competitive time.

Try offering Early Birds a time sensitive deal (i.e., Save 20% before Nov. 1). Limited time offers create urgency and get shoppers to take action. Another good approach to capture Early Bird business is to offer a free gift with purchase before a specified date.

Wish lists are another way to generate business early on. You can set this up online or do it manually in your store. Create a way for customers to indicate what they want as a gift. They can email their wish lists or it can be viewed at your business.

Tip: Ask Your Customers What They Want

In the first stages of your communications send your customers an online survey. Find out what their buying habits might look like around the holidays. With the economy the way it has been this season is going to be very different from previous years. It’s a good idea to understand what these differences will be. (Why not keep the survey going all season? What a great resource for next year! Just add the link to receipts or confirmation emails.)
Make sure you’re prepared. If you offer incentives to buy early, you’ll likely have more people taking you up on your promotions. Take advantage of this time also to review your inventory and your revenue generating opportunities. Doing this allows you to understand which offers you can present and easily fulfill before the holiday rush begins.

Here are some ideas to get you going on your Early Bird specials. Make sure your email subject line says what you’re promoting, for example: “Early Holiday Gift Ideas” or “3 Days Left to Save 10%.”

* Special discount on orders over a certain amount
* Extra 10% off before ‘specified date’
* Free gift with purchase while supplies last
* Buy two get one free on certain products
* Free upgrades with combo purchases
* Double points on frequent buyer cards
* Announce special holiday hours

**Tip:** A great way to stand out this season is through your holiday greetings. VerticalResponse offers two easy and green ways to send your greetings. You can send a holiday e-greeting with one of VerticalResponse’s many holiday card templates, or you can send your customers/friends a holiday postcard. VerticalResponse postcards are made of 30% recycled material so you can be green this season.
Making Yourself Stand Out

Starting in November, the competition is fierce for getting your message in front of your prospects and customers. You need your message to stand out. Consumers are in a shopping mindset and just starting to feel the holiday pressure. They need ideas to simplify their purchasing decisions. When offers like free shipping become standard, what will help you stand out?

An easy way to stand out is with your subject line. This is the first thing your readers will see. Be sure to include a benefit in your subject line. There will be lots of holiday emails to read this time of year. If you emphasize your benefit (i.e., save time, save gas, more selection or hard to find items), readers will be compelled to open your email.

Try your best to make shopping easy. Offer a checklist of people who may need gifts this year and make gift suggestions. You can offer some age, sex and relationship-appropriate gift suggestions from your product and/or service inventory. Create email communications that specialize in promotions by price range or recipient. Those types of communications will be viewed as time savers and worth opening.

Personalization goes a long way in general, but especially during this busy time. Get to know your customers names. Whether it’s greeting them by name in the store or personalizing their name/recent purchase in an email, make doing business with you a memorable experience.

Make sure your message is heard and not overpowered by other marketing. Try complementing your emails with direct mail postcards to break through the clutter. You can reach more people with postcards. Include your holiday discounts or online promo codes on them. Postcards are great for holiday greetings too!

This holiday season, make sure you’re solving problems and not just pushing products. Email marketing should be relevant, timely and valuable to the recipient, not just to you. Anything you can do to help your customers eliminate gift-giving stress will be helpful. Make your customers see your business as a valuable resource. If you do that, your products and services will sell!

Tip: It is the season of giving and being green. People love to buy when proceeds go to charity or are benefiting the environment. Be sure to highlight your giving and/or green spirit in your messaging and on your website.
Here are some other ideas that you can put your own twist on to differentiate yourself and capture business during the holidays.

- Create gift guides
- Offer free shipping (limited time)
- Offer discounts on product/service bundles
- Put price ranges in the subject lines
- Create recipient oriented offers ‘For Mom’
- Promote ‘new shipments arriving’
- Announce special holiday events
- Send coupons after someone has made a purchase

**Tip:** What do you sell that could be repackaged or repositioned as a stocking stuffer? How are you highlighting that in your store, and in your email marketing? Be creative. Take advantage of this profitable niche of the holiday shopping season.

**Tip:** In a rush yourself? Need some holiday design assistance? Check out VerticalResponse’s pre-built holiday templates. There are hundreds to choose from.

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**Reaching Last-Minute Shoppers**

We know from the research and experience that a lot of consumers put off their holiday shopping till December. It can be a crazy and stressful time. This is an opportunity for your business to reach out to all the procrastinators and give them gift ideas. It’s important to make doing business with you as easy as possible.

When you offer customers ‘nick-of-time’ solutions to their holiday shopping and entertaining problems, they’ll thank you with their sales and patronage.

For heel-draggers, offers like free shipping, free gift-wrap and gift suggestions are good ideas. Offers like these help make them look like they put thought into their purchases. They’ll remember you saved the day, and they’ll come back long after the decorations are packed away.
If you haven’t already, promote your gift certificates/cards. They are easy last-minute gifts. Consumers like gift certificates/cards because they are convenient for both the giver and the recipient, and take the guesswork out of buying gifts. They are good for businesses because consumers often spend more than the face value of the card when they redeem them. Sometimes the certificates/cards aren’t even redeemed. According to eMarketer, nearly 3 in 10 major retailers promote online gift cards in their emails during the eight days before December 25th.

Another thing to keep in mind during the holiday rush is to be sure to communicate important dates (i.e., shipping) in order to meet your stated service levels. This is also the time to evaluate your inventory. You’ll want to promote items that will be more difficult to sell after the New Year. Don’t lose your momentum during this time, you want to end the year on a high note.

Ideas to Get the Attention of Last-Minute Shoppers:

- Easy last-minute gift suggestions
- Gift cards/certificates (online or paper)
- Free gift-wrapping
- Extended holiday hours
- Extra 20% off
- Almost sold out (time-sensitive offer)
- Last day to order with guaranteed delivery
- End of year clearance sale

Regardless of the timing of the holiday season, it’s essential that you consistently give your customers unique and motivating offers. Take a look at your business and the benefits you have to offer. Use your strengths to help you stand out from the competition.

Tip: If you have a good relationship with another business, help each other out. You can pass out each other’s coupons to drive new traffic to one another’s business. Add a promo code on the coupon to track where the new business is coming from. Or you can pass out each others business cards with your web address at the bottom. The more people who find out about you the better!
Remember the Basics This Time of Year: Email Best Practices

The holidays can do more than put consumers into chaos, sometimes they can wreck havoc on businesses too! This isn’t the time to slack on the basics. The holiday season means that your business needs to be on it’s A-game. Below are some reminders of basic best practices for email marketing.

Building Your List

The holiday season is when you are in front of the largest number of people all year. Wouldn’t it be great to stay in contact with everyone all year long? This is a great opportunity to build your contact list. Make a point to have your employees ask customers if they would like to join your email list, or sign the guest book. Other ideas include: adding an opt-in form to your website or blog, creating refer-a-friend programs, or having a holiday drawing with customer business cards so customers can win one of your great products or services.

Now that you have these new contacts you need to make sure that they can recognize you. Start sending out regularly scheduled emails to your prospects and customers. Base the timing on the content you have. Anywhere from once a week to once a month is good.

Subject Lines

Subject lines are arguably the most important part of an email marketing campaign. It’s the equivalent of the ‘outer envelope’ of a direct mail campaign. If it doesn’t catch the eye of your recipient and doesn’t stress a benefit, then you’ve lost a potential sale.
Holiday Subject Line Ideas

Early Birds:
- Save 30% Before Nov.1
- Early Bird Gets $10 Off
- Plan Ahead and Get a Free Gift

Primetime Shoppers:
- 3 Gifts for Him Under $40
- One-Stop Shop for All Gifts
- Easy Gifts for Music Lovers

Last-Minute Shoppers:
- Last-Minute: Give a Gift Card
- Last Day to Order for (date) Delivery
- Wrap Up Your Shipping on Us

Retail:
- Avoid Lines – Shop Online and Save
- $20-$50 Gift Baskets in Stock
- Shipping is On Us – This Week Only

Software/Hardware:
- Join Our Webinar and End the Year Strong
- Solutions for Success this Season
- Good Seasonal Reading: Get Our White Paper

Restaurants:
- Have {COMPANY_NAME}’s Holiday Party with Us
- Appetizers for You and 5 Friends On Us
- Shop at Sally’s and Get a Drink at Harry’s

Salon or Day Spas:
- Get Party-Ready Now - $45 Facials
- Refreshing Holiday Gift – Spice Scented Lotion
- Give a Mani & Get a Pedi

Wineries:
- Book Now – 10 days Left for Holiday Parties
- Wine Clubs: The Gift that Gives All Year Long
- Trio of Wine Under $50 with Gift Pack and Card
Don’t Forget the Fundamentals:

- Stick to 40-50 characters – Most email readers have the default set so that anything beyond 40 characters in the subject line will not display.
- Do not repeat your ‘From’ label; It’s a waste of space. Remember, you’ve got only 40 characters to grab their attention.
- Avoid all caps – Not only is this akin to screaming at your recipient, email readers may filter it into the junk folder.
- Avoid excessive punctuation – Because this technique is often used by spammers, overuse of punctuation can be filtered.
- Do not abuse the word “Free” – This can also appear “spammy” and be sent to the junk folder.

Forward-to-a-Friend Link

It’s often forgotten, but you might pick up a few new customers from your current loyal ones just by asking for their referral. Always include a forward-to-a-friend link in your newsletters, announcements and promotions. It is easily done using the VerticalResponse forward-to-a-friend feature.

Host Your Emails on a Web Page

There is going to be so much email flying around the next few months that you might see an increase in “image blocking”. If you include a link that says ‘Click here to View This Email in a Browser,’ then any recipients that are having issues can view your email as a web page.

Alternative Text

Another spam filter solution is making sure you’re mindful of the alternative text (alt. text) you give your images. This is the text that pops up when your images are either moused over or blocked. For example, alt text for an image of a holiday gift basket might be ‘Holiday Gift Baskets under $30.’ Your recipients without images will still understand the offer and are enticed to click to view the hosted version of the email or click to accept the images.
The Holidays & Social Media

It’s hard not to notice all the recent activity around social media. Now is the time for you to start building these channels. You can take advantage of blogging, social networks, online communities, and online videos to get the word out about your products and services during the holidays. Be sure to update all your social media channels with your seasonal messaging and offers. The more times a customer or potential customer hears about your offers the merrier.

Holiday blogging should include updates about your business and products. Tell people what is working for you and what people should take advantage of. You should also be writing about relevant topics in your industry. Encourage comments and conversations, as well as share what others are saying in your industry. The more people that talk about you the better. Just remember to be honest. If you lose your credibility online it will be next to impossible to restore it. VerticalResponse offers pre-build opt-in forms that are easy to build and integrate on your blog and website. Make sure to add one today, and start capturing email addresses for those interested in your products and services.

Social networking sites are amazing for helping you add that personal touch to your business. Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace and the VerticalResponse Marketing Lounge allow you to communicate with each prospect or customer directly. Set up a Facebook Fan page and post your products and services. Be sure to include holiday offers and messaging as soon as you have them ready for launch. Make your social networking sites feel exclusive with insider tips or special offers. This is a great incentive to get people to become a fan or spread word about your business.

Micro Blogging and Twitter have been a hot topic this year. It is something that is so easy to set up and use. Many businesses have given it a try and are benefiting from it. After you set up your Twitter profile, remember to add key words in your bio. Next, go to search.twitter.com and search your company name, personal name, and product or service names. This is a great way to see who is talking about you. Join the conversation and pass out your holiday ideas and offers, to yet another audience.

Video is a great opportunity to increase back-links, social tagging and increase your search rankings. Upload your holiday videos to YouTube, Facebook, and your own site. Tag your holiday videos with words that relate to your products or services and make sure to email the link to the video and ask your contacts to pass it on. If you are a B2B business, webinars and demos are a proven tactic to increase sales. Be sure to highlight webinars/demos in your emails and on your website.
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We’ve covered a number of different ideas to use throughout the holidays. Integrating these strategies can help you and your business get the most out of this holiday season and beyond. Thanks to the instant nature of email marketing, there’s still time to get a piece of the holiday shopping pie. Email marketing can help you make the most of the spike in holiday traffic and spending. It can also create a positive impression of your company that will last long into next year.

The ideas don’t have to end here either. VerticalResponse is an active participant in social media with our award-winning blog, online community, Twitter (vr4smallbiz) and Facebook page (http://www.facebook.com/VerticalResponse). We want to hear from you. We have created a group (Make the Most of the Holidays) in our user community, the VerticalResponse Marketing Lounge. The Lounge is a hot place for cool marketing ideas. Go to http://lounge.verticalresponse.com and join today for free. Begin by creating a profile for you and your business then share your ideas on what works and what doesn’t with other VerticalResponse customers.

To learn more about how to send professional-looking emails, postcards, and online surveys that generate results, check out our live weekly demo or the “How to Do Everything” section of our website under Education & Support!

The holiday season is such an important time for businesses, the customers you touch this season can impact your business now and on into the future. Stay on top of your marketing and don’t forget to have fun! Happy Holidays!

Log In! Keep Your Business Bustling this Holiday with VerticalResponse  
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