

The Small Business Guide to Holiday Planning

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1 Gift #1: Top-Notch Staffing.....04

- Take stock of existing workforce: Regular employees may not be able to work regular schedules.
- Staff up: New, seasonal employees can help absorb the crush of holiday shoppers.
- Maintain full oversight: Use an app to make scheduling easier.
- Provide extra training: Well-trained employees can provide stellar customer service.

2 Gift #2: Clear Plan, Full Shelves.....06

- Stockpile bestsellers: You know what your customers want, so make sure and have it on hand.
- Optimize: Inventory management apps can help small business owners stay on top of their stock.
- Plan for longer lead times. Consider using an inventory calendar to track order deadlines and delivery dates.
- Anticipate headaches. A product may suddenly become unavailable.

3 Gift #3: Creativity + Technology = Smart Strategies for Building Customer Loyalty.....08

- Busy shoppers: Consider offering mobile checkout so they're not stuck waiting in line.
- Social media devotee: Create a selfie station to encourage user-generated content.
- Omnichannel shopper: Bring your products online to drive visits to your physical store.
- Repeat shopper: Write thank yous to demonstrate your gratitude.
- Researcher: Encourage shoppers to consult review sites while in-store.
- Impulse shopper: Send email and text messages to boost on-the-fly buys.

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- Prevent fraud: Already-nervous customers will be lost if their personal information is compromised.
- Be mobile friendly: Websites should have responsive design.
- Develop omnichannel experiences: Shoppers frequently move between online stores and physical ones, so merchants should consider creating a seamless experience.

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- Maintain temporary higher headcount: seasonal employees expedite the return process.
- Be transparent: generous return policies can turn first-time shoppers into repeat customers.
- Plan for gift card redemptions: have inventory on hand for customers wanting to redeem gift cards.
- Identify slow sellers: mark down poor-performing products to make way for full-priced merch.
- Get smarter: use sales trends analysis to be smarter for next year's holiday season.

Introduction

F or merchants, 'tis the season to be jolly indeed.

Stores are bustling as customers mill about, selecting gifts for everyone on their list (and hopefully, picking up a few impulse purchases along the way). Eateries are jam-packed, as many shoppers dine out as a means of respite, while others grab-and-go so they can quickly get back to their bargain hunting.

Retail sales spike during the holiday season, accounting for up to **30 percent** of annual sales. But while the National Retail Federation (NRF) forecasts that sales in November and December will increase **up to 4.8 percent** over 2017, totaling up to \$720 billion, it's not a given that every single business will profit.

The holiday season can be a make-or-break time for merchants—new ones and veterans like. Those that plan ahead and prepare for the busy time have an opportunity to capitalize by growing not just profits, but customer loyalty as well. Those that lack strategy and insight are at risk of limping through the holiday season and losing market share as shoppers forge relationships with other businesses.

Consider each of the following ideas as a gift that might help your holiday sales deliver for your bottom-line results.



Gift #1: Top-Notch Staffing Plans



The Gift: Top-Notch Staffing Plans

Even the most visionary, hard-working small business owner shouldn't go it alone during the holiday season. Proper staffing levels and well-trained employees can help create a memorable customer service experience.

Start prepping for the holiday rush as early as you can. The additional hours of work you put in now might not only reduce your own stress later on, but that of your employees as well.

Consider starting here:



Step 1: Take stock of your existing workforce.

Your current employees can play a vital role during the holiday shopping season. Anticipate that their work availability may change during your most busy time. Some may want to take time off to visit family or take a vacation. If they're students, they may want to head home early. Others could get sick. Inquire early about holiday plans, then determine what additional resources you may need.



Step 2: Staff up.

You may need to hire seasonal staff to keep up with the temporary holiday demand, and you might also need additional employees on the floor, as well as behind the scenes to help with inventory stocking, product shipping, and online customer service.



Step 3: Provide extra training.

Frazzled holiday shoppers can take out their frustration and anxiety on your employees. Stellar customer service can help mitigate these stressful moments. Findings from Genesys' [Cost of Poor Customer Service Survey](#) reports that better human service is the most requested improvement by 40 percent of consumers. Prepare seasonal and long-standing workers for the holiday rush by offering special training sessions.



Step 4: Maintain full oversight.

With so much to juggle during the holiday season, small business owners may be tempted to let little things slide. You can lean on apps, like [Time Clock](#) by Homebase, to stay on top of everything in less time. The craziness of employee scheduling might not seem so crazy since the app manages clocking in and out, shift trades, and time-off requests. It also manages payroll so employees working overtime and on holidays like Christmas Eve and Black Friday receive any extra pay to which they're entitled.

A close-up photograph of a pine branch with several brown pinecones and a bundle of cinnamon sticks. The pine needles are a vibrant green, and the pinecones are a rich brown color. The cinnamon sticks are bundled together and are also a warm brown color. The background is dark, making the green and brown colors stand out.

Gift #2:
Clear Plan, Full Shelves

The Gift: Clear Plan, Full Shelves

Smart inventory management can be a boon to your business during the holidays. Consider stocking plenty of perennial bestsellers for your regular customers, as well as a selection of unique offerings to draw in new shoppers. What you don't want: tons of items left over post-holiday.

This can be a particularly challenging task for new small business owners, but veterans might struggle with inventory levels as well. These tips can help you achieve the right balance.



Stockpile bestsellers.

Your inventory data can tell you what your customers want, so make sure you can give it to them during the holidays. Your tried-and-true products throughout the year could be hits during the holidays as well. Place orders for these items early and be mindful about restocking throughout the busy shopping season so you don't run out the second week of December.



Optimize.

The use of an inventory management system is the best way to streamline purchase orders and vendor management. The ideal inventory management system should also provide cost and sales reporting, making it easy to identify which products have the largest profit margins (and thus, could be part of a holiday promotion). Other inventory apps like [Wolong Sales and Inventory](#), [Inventory Management](#), [SimpleOrder](#) and [Top Up: Purchase Orders](#) can help automate tedious inventory-related tasks.



Plan for longer lead times.

The holiday rush can affect all parts of the inventory chain. Vendors receive more purchase orders, so fulfillment times can increase. Logistics companies have more inventory to transport and yes, you guessed it, shipping times can increase. Working backwards from the holiday season, create an inventory calendar tracking when you need to place orders and merchandise delivery dates.



Anticipate potential headaches.

Vendors occasionally run into trouble, leaving them unable to meet fulfillment. Be prepared to ask for (or even suggest) a replacement product if something becomes unavailable or if the vendor can't promise delivery by the previously agreed-upon date.

**Gift #3:
Creativity + Technology =
Smart Strategies for Building
Customer Loyalty**



Past performance does not guarantee future results.

Case in point: Last year's hot selling product can be this year's bargain bin resident. And as technology rapidly changes how people shop, veteran business owners can look to tactics of holidays past for inspiration, but they shouldn't necessarily replicate them.

Marketing plans should contribute to bottom-line results in a lasting way. They should target today's tech-driven shoppers, but promotions shouldn't cut into profit margins too deeply—they should instead be effective at building a roster of repeat customers. Otherwise, a merchant's hard work may not pay off in the long run.



Target: The busy shopper

E-commerce is fueling the love of the one-click purchase, an experience pioneered by retail juggernaut Amazon (whose patent on the process, it turns out, [expired in 2017](#), opening it up to other companies to replicate). To prevent customers from having to stand in line at the cash register, merchants might consider investing in a mobile POS system, like [Clover Flex](#), which conveniently accepts payments wherever customers are inside your business.



Target: The social media devotee

Who doesn't love free, high-quality user-generated content? A survey by visual commerce platform Olapic discovered that [76 percent](#) of consumers believe that content shared by average people is more honest than advertising from brands. Furthermore, the Total Retail customer survey from PwC reports that [39 percent](#) of shoppers look to social media for inspiration on what to buy. Small business owners might capitalize with creative ideas, like designating a small area of the restaurant or store for selfie taking. To execute this tactic, place a call to action encouraging consumers to post the photos to their social media platforms using a customized hashtag and tagging the business.



Target: The omnichannel shopper

Many shoppers research products online, then head out to local stores to make a purchase. The app [Pointy](#) increases your visibility online by creating a webpage of your store's products. (All that's needed is a manufacturer's barcode and a few minutes of your time.) Customers can locate your retail location simply by conducting a Google search for a product.

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Target: The repeat shopper

A simple thank you can go a long way in building loyal, repeat customers. Personalized email messages, like those sent by the app [Abreeze Link for Constant Contact](#), are a great way to express your appreciation to valued shoppers. For your biggest VIPs, consider sending a handwritten holiday greeting in the mail.



Target: The researcher

A Retail Dive survey reports that [two-thirds](#) of consumers research a product online before shopping for it in a store. Savvy merchants can increase the chance of a sale by posting calls to action that encourage shoppers to conduct research while in the store and directing them to online review sites or a brand's website and social media accounts.



Target: The impulse shopper

On-the-spot purchases are a valuable revenue tool for merchants. One way to encourage these buys is to send limited-time offers with the [FiveStars Integration](#) app. It sends promotions via email, text or push notification that can boost a small business's conversion rate. To be heard during the busy holiday season, retailers need to stand out: a targeted subject line, consistent volume, and inclusion of applicable links are some email marketing best practices you might try.



**Gift #4:
E-Commerce for the Pros**

The Gift: E-Commerce for the Pros

E-commerce can be a boon to a small business. Online sales are expected to increase [15.5 percent](#) during the holiday season, according to Deloitte. Sales could reach as high as \$119.9 billion.

But offering online shopping alone isn't enough. Pitney Bowes reports that [almost half](#) of all online holiday shoppers were disappointed by the experience. How can merchants offer standout online customer service that ultimately benefits their bottom line?



Prevent fraud.

Credit card fraud over peak holiday shopping season is projected to increase [14 percent](#) from 2017 to 2018. The higher the volume of e-commerce, the more scammers are looking for vulnerabilities. So it's no wonder that PwC's Total Retail survey found that [two-thirds](#) of shoppers fear their personal information being hacked. [Clover Security Plus](#) protects small businesses—and their customers—with the latest in payment processing security, including end-to-end encryption and a PCI compliance wizard that enforces standards, as well as a score for your data security and risk reduction.



Be mobile friendly.

In 2018, 53 percent of Cyber Week traffic and 32 percent of sales [came from mobile](#) (smartphones and tablets combined). That's why it's so important that your website incorporates responsive design. Clover Online does just that: adapting your brick-and-mortar store to an online marketplace that's both nice to look at and user-friendly, and on both a desktop and a smartphone or tablet.



Develop omnichannel experiences.

While mobile shopping is growing in popularity, in-store shopping is still an incredibly important experience for merchants to hone. Some shoppers are window shopping online, but making their purchases in-store. They might also be researching an item while standing in a retail location, or buying online and picking their items up at a nearby store. [A third](#) of holiday shoppers say that the ability to buy online and pickup in store convinced them to make a purchase, according to NRF's 2017 Holiday Planning Playbook. Merchants should think about the experience of shopping on their website and shopping in their store, and how they might unify the two.

**Gift #5:
No Post-Holiday Blues**



The Gift: No Post-Holiday Blues

The official close to the gift buying season may be December 25, there's a halo effect that extends until mid January. In fact, December 26 is rapidly becoming [one of the busiest shopping days](#) of the year.



Maintain temporary higher headcount.

Product returns are rampant in the days after Christmas. If budgets allow, plan to keep seasonal workers on until the New Year. Superior customer service that processes returns efficiently could help first-time shoppers become repeat customers.



Be transparent.

Create a frictionless return process for shoppers. Customer-minded return policies that include a large return window, refund of original payment method (as opposed to store credit), and in-store returns of purchases can lead to repeat shoppers.



Plan for gift card redemptions.

In 2018, gift card sales in the United States are predicted to reach [\\$340 billion](#) worth of gift cards. Their ever-growing popularity has led to an increase in the number of shoppers hitting the stores the day after Christmas. With thoughtful inventory planning and an emphasis on debuting new items in the middle of the holiday season, merchants give themselves opportunities for gift card redemptions for full-priced merchandise, as opposed to discounted items.



ID slow sellers.

Not every item is going to be a bestseller. Use your inventory app to recognize which ones did not sell at full price. These items can drag down your bottom line, and you might consider discounting them to help them move more readily and free up space for new, full-priced merchandise.



Get smarter.

That same inventory app can help you identify sales trends and successes. Catalog your learnings and use them to get smarter for next holiday season.

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