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# Planning Holiday Email

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Written by



# 1. The Lowdown

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Making the most of the email channel during the year-end holiday season (“Holiday”) means smart planning early—think summer! Thinking about Holiday email differs greatly depending on whether your organization is primarily a retailer or not.

## Summer Holiday Planning for Retailers

Holiday drives not only your company’s revenues, but your competitors’ too. Competition begets clutter: the Retail Email Blog reported that the volume of email from top retailers increased 62% from October to December 2007. Of course, this figure does not take into account the onslaught from other channels that invariably lead to consumer fatigue.

The challenge to the retailer, then, lies in finding ways to rise above the clutter rather than merely adding to it. Key tactics include:

- **Review.** What worked last year? Which emails resulted in the greatest sales? In addition to repeating your best moves, consider basic segmentation to take advantage of easily targeted consumers. Customers who bought apparel last year are fairly likely to buy it again this year, so target past buyers with additional emails focused on things they bought.
- **Mark your calendar.** By now, consumers have come to expect great deals on Black Friday (the day after Thanksgiving, of course) and many consumers look for deals online each Monday thereafter (Cyber and Echo Mondays). Plan emails and other communications accordingly. Remember, many retailers begin Black Friday before dawn, so make sure to put the email in the inbox earlier in the week to bring attention to your deals.

Moreover, Holiday lasts a long time, often starting before Halloween and not ending until the last gift card gets rung up sometime in January. Develop an editorial calendar for email to ensure good presence in the inbox and coordination with communications in other channels.

Similarly, avoid the temptation to email too often, at least to your entire list. While very engaged customers (as determined by keeping track of who opens and clicks through emails) might want to see emails daily, most customers will not want to hear from your store more than three times per week maximum.

- **Mix it up.** Emails that come at the same time every week, or feature the same sorts of offers will quickly render themselves invisible to the consumer. Include a variety of offers at different times to keep the consumer interested in what your store has to sell.
- **Make time for reading.** Plan in advance for time during holiday to monitor competitors’ communications. Email gives retailers a great opportunity for a rapid response to a competitor’s challenge. For instance, if a competitor promotes a deal that your brand can beat, a quick email might interest consumers.



- **Explore new communications channels.** The consumers' inboxes are flooded during holiday, but other communications channels hold promise. Mobile messaging, in particular, gives retailers the opportunity to contact customers while they're shopping, e.g., by timing texts for weekend days. Obviously, retailers need to begin SMS number and permission capture well before holiday to take advantage of this channel.

Even further afield, perhaps a truly media-savvy marketer will create an entertaining Twitter feed to engage customers. This feed could encompass anything from the 21<sup>st</sup>-century equivalent of Kmart's old Blue Light Specials to the running commentary of some urban hipster trolling the aisles for interesting merchandise.

- **Test in the off-season.** Given the crucial nature of Holiday, retailers should optimize email well before the season; it's better to find out what doesn't work when fewer consumers are paying attention. Summer and early fall are great times to test creative, subject lines, and offers to develop the hardest-working email possible.

### Summer Holiday Planning for Non-Retailers

Got all that? Good, because most of these recommendations apply to non-retailers as well. As noted above, in-boxes will become especially cluttered over holidays, so non-retailers should generally counter-program communications if they want to be heard. If you've got something important to say via the e-channel, try to do so before Holiday gears up or risk getting lost amidst the clutter.

On the other hand, Holiday offers specific opportunities for non-retailers that have something to sell.

- **Manufacturers.** Just as retailers enjoy outsized revenues during Holiday, many manufacturers depend on this period to sell their products via retailers. Make it easy for your retail partners to sell by directing consumers to their sites, either within the email or via landing pages on your site. Track where consumers go to get a sense of which retailers are benefiting the most.
- **Travel.** Historically, travel marketers have less success in the e-channel later in the year primarily because they depend on that channel for last-minute bookings and most consumers plan their holiday travel in advance. Holiday may be a good time to wish your customers well for the new year to boost brand perceptions.
- **B-to-B.** Holiday marks a down time for b-to-b business budgets, which tend to get sewn up in September and October, and business people are often rushing to complete objectives by the year's end. Rather than going completely dark, b-to-b marketers should consider keeping customers and prospects engaged with surveys or other questionnaires to keep them interested.



## 2. Why do I need to know about it?

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While the calendar makers have not moved Christmas any closer to Independence Day, marketers of all stripes should begin planning Holiday e-marketing efforts during the summer, even as beach sand begins to accumulate in the trunks of their cars. While retailers, who traditionally derive 40% of their profits in the fourth quarter, make a point of planning out Holiday early, sometime in spring, non-retailers should also think about what to do when the winds turn cold.

Why start so early? The flexibility of e-mail often spoils marketers by giving them the opportunity to execute campaigns at the last minute. Unfortunately, coordinating email, mobile messaging, and other communications requires good planning. Moreover, the nature of the commerce year means that marketing tends to heat up starting in August and continue unabated until January. That means that if you don't think about Holiday marketing in depth now, chances are you never will.

## 3. The thing to remember is...

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Retailer or not, a marketer should look forward to planning for Holiday as a chance to apply learning and to think through an evolving communication strategy. While wild-eyed discount pitchmen may have popularized Christmas in August, let me leave you with a more traditional take on the holiday: "it comes but once each year."