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Guest comment: Supporting your online store this Christmas

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While online shopping generating its highest volumes ever, now is no time to sit back and wait for your customers to come to you. Simon Bowker, Operations Director of digital direct marketing company eCircle offers advice on how to use email to drive traffic to your website during this critical retail period.

Don't be afraid to get personal with your customers. Little steps such as making sure the emails you send are personalised or lead to personalised landing pages will make a big impact. Everyone feels pressured by time and never more so than over the Christmas period so delivering relevant and targeted suggestions will speed up the time it takes to shop for your customer and increase the likelihood of them making a purchase.

If possible use your email communications to reward loyal customers. Last year, over a third of top retailers mentioned gift cards in their emails at least once in the five days before Christmas (research by Email Experience Council). Smart retailers understand that discount vouchers are one of the most effective ways to reward a customer. By sending an email offering customers a gift card of £15 when they spend £50 online, not only ensures that you are making your customer feel good but you are also encouraging repeat purchases.

You only have to think about Thresher's 2006 discount voucher that was 'accidentally' emailed to consumers. They had one of the best seasons to date and managed to generate enough interest to get consumers queuing round the block for their products.

There are other ways to encourage people to shop with you aside from offering discounts. If your diary is anything like mine, December just slips away. It is therefore important to help your customers with their shopping whether they are the type to plan ahead or leave everything to the last minute. Two ways of doing this are by making sure they are aware of the last order date for Christmas delivery and offering other flexible options such as buy online - pick up in store.

Wading through your inbox is hard work at the best of times. So over this busy seasonal period you can only expect customers to respond to the most significant and relevant information. Therefore you need to be using your data to target the information you send. Look at what your data tells you, are some users more receptive to offer driven emails e.g. coupons and vouchers or would they prefer you use content driven emails with suggestions and ideas such as gift buying guides. Use this information to segment your data and target accordingly.

As Christmas approaches competition on the market picks up and that means crowded inboxes. Relevancy is the key to gaining cut through.

If you're after a broader or deeper reach consider list buying to extend your messages. While it is often preferable to organically grow your database, sometimes it's not a practical approach in the midst of a busy season. List buying allows you to quickly extend your database.

This needn't mean you are attacking inboxes at random. Rather with select screening, you can ensure you have the most relevant contacts based on a number of factors. For example, the contacts that have shown an interest in your sector, are keen on receiving offers or even have a long history of making their purchases online.

Social Media is all about giving power to the people and you need to embrace it. Customer reviews are becoming a more important part of the consumer decision-making process so why not include some within your email. You can also provide a link to a feedback form on the email which will encourage customer engagement and ultimately trust.

Emails don't just serve the purpose of driving traffic onto your website they can also pick up on those distracted at point of purchase. Industry research shows that up to 75% of online shoppers will abandon their shopping basket before they complete the checkout process. There are multiple reasons why this happens but often it could be as simple as a distraction away from the computer. Clearly, this has a huge impact on brands Christmas income. It's important to know that these customers are often not completely lost to you and you can take steps to re-engage them. For example, a targeted email delivered to a customer's inbox highlighting the product they had added to a basket or that offers them a suitable alternative can often be the nudge needed to convert the sale.

The great thing about these simple tips is that they can be put into practice quickly and with relative ease. By rewarding your customer, keeping it relevant and testing ways to generate customer involvement over the Christmas period you'll be well on your way to raising your revenue and having a Merry Christmas after all!

By Simon Bowker

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