CLEARCO VISTAS

BFCM 2021: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Tips and tricks for a successful season

When it comes to Black Friday/Cyber Monday (BFCM), planning is the name of the game. The earlier you start, the better prepared you will be for any mishaps or pivots along the way. This probably comes as no surprise, especially if this isn't your first BFCM rodeo. Starting as early as possible will ensure you'll be able to handle any challenge that comes your way during the busy holiday season—even those you didn't expect!

Your BFCM *planning guide.*

If this is your first BFCM, you bet fast is to treat it as a learning experience (or ambitious with setting realistic expectations, and remember to stay motivated no matter what curveballs come your way. It might feel daunting, but you don't have to go it alone. We've put together a bonanza of some Cyber Monday best practices as you count down towards the big day (or week).

BFCM COUNTDOWN

1 year before

Like in 2020, brands should expect an earlier, busier, and longer BFCM season. With fewer brick-and-mortar deals, online shopping has become the certified to the majority of brands' Cyber Monday strategy. Long lines of shoppers will now be replaced by hours spent researching the best deals online.

Identify your top sales channels.

Omnichannel selling has been a rapidly growing trend for years now, and it's important to be where your customers are shopping this weekend. But it's important to be strategic and focus on multiple channels for brands to win during BFCM. Ask yourself: Where are your customers? Where are they most loyal? Instagram, Whether that's Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Amazon, or—most likely—a combination.

Keep in mind that marketplaces, like Google, tend to have a longer lead time prior to optimal performance, so you'll want to get started on that as soon as possible.

Watch the competition.

Granted, you should be doing this all year round, not only during the lead up to BFCM. Keep an eye on your competitors' ad campaigns, their pricing and their marketing efforts, will give you a better idea how you'll measure up to them during BFCM. Especially if this isn't your first rodeo, you should be able to see patterns in your competitors' campaigns that generate a lot of buzz and attention. There are a number of ways to monitor your competitors, including:

- Subscribing to their email lists and monitoring their campaigns, including how early they send out content or early bird deals
- Visiting their social media channels and paying attention to their high performing content
- Setting up Google Alerts to see which websites are highlighting your competition

Optimize fulfillment workflows.

Shoppers value their time in short periods of time: impatient, careful, and early, planning. In order to avoid disruptions in your fulfillment workflows during BFCM, consider:

- Ensuring your fulfillment area is optimized. Whether you're using a third-party fulfillment provider or fulfilling orders in-house, fulfillment delays can become hectic very quickly.
- Hiring additional fulfillment staff. Hiring decisions don't happen overnight, so make sure you make those decisions well in advance of the busy season.
- Systematizing how you prioritize your orders. Consider customer expectations, shipping deadlines, fulfillment requirements, and product types, to name a few.

Evaluate your inventory.

Inventory management is critical for a successful holiday season. Keep on top of your inventory levels throughout the year, so you don't have to be concerned about running out of stock during the busiest days of the year. Ensure you're prepared for the holiday rush by forecasting demand as early as possible. This is particularly true for brands that rely on multiple suppliers to source or manufacture inventory.

BFCM COUNTDOWN

6 months before

Okay, so you've now reached the halfway mark. You're not scrambling though, because if you're following this guide, you've already been preparing for the past six months!

Put together a back-up plan.

Being prepared means planning for the worst. Ensure you have a back-up plan in place in the event of any unexpected delays, setbacks, or even a shortage of inventory. Although it's easy to get caught up in the excitement of the holiday season, it's important to stay grounded and keep your eyes on the prize.

Considering last year's supply chain issues resulted in massive delays, brands should not be preparing for if delays occur. They should be preparing for when they occur. Brands should be aware of what's pressure is there about, but when they're worried about the result of your planning, you'll be pleasantly surprised.

Set up how you're going to track data.

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Knowledge is power, and data is king.
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Understanding your promotion's success or failure—including the wins and losses—is crucial to a successful BFCM. Many brands rely on Google Analytics, Facebook Pixel, and other tracking tools to understand your customers better. If you can understand your customers with tools like CRM assessments, you'll be in a better position to give them exactly what they want.

BFCM COUNTDOWN

3 months before

Now that you're a few months away from BFCM, the anticipation is starting to grow. At the three month mark, you should focus on optimizing your e-commerce site so it's not only user- and mobile-friendly, but also so it can handle the surge in traffic and activity.

Evaluate your checkout process.

80% of U.S. Black Friday shoppers used Affirm through Shopify last year, and Shopify merchants who used Shop Pay saw an increase in checkout conversions and an 18 percent lift in average order value. Ensure you don't lose out on conversions as a result of a clunky checkout process.

Test (and re-test) your website.

The last thing you want is to have your website go down during the busiest days of the year. Ensure your website is adequately hosted and capable of focusing on other parts of the business.

To make sure your site has the capacity to meet the surge in demand:

- Test your online store's server load capacity with a tool like BlitzGear
- Run speed tests on both your homepage and your highest traffic collection and product pages
- Re-test your site a few times before go-live

Assess your site's UX and get feedback.

Another conversion killer is a poorly designed UX. Make sure your website is easy to navigate, intuitive, and your steps large or short enough to ensure that there is a customer with a negative shopping experience.

One way to ensure this is to have a friend or pair of pairs (or two) to use their your site. You can also take advantage of a tool like UserTesting, which allows a random user to browse your website and give their feedback.

BFCM COUNTDOWN

2 months before

Keep in mind that emails about BFCM deals flood customers' inboxes every year. To cut out all the noise, you're going to need an offer that will make you stand out against the competition. So how do you put together an offer your customers won't be able to resist?

- Run a "pre-shopper" or "can't miss" sale in which a popular item is heavily discounted, where customers are encouraged to pick up their items or their order is shipped
- Consider offering product bundles at a discount
- Gently your others—opin for rate discounts are a fun way to entice shoppers
- Offer daily, limited time only deals throughout the BFCM period
- Provide free shipping to new visitors and/or on all orders 75 dollars larger than your average order amount
- Put together gift guides as a marketing tool for customers to peruse in advance of BFCM

You'll also need to start considering paid channels at this time, if this is part of your BFCM marketing strategy. Keep in mind that bids often get more expensive during the competitive holiday seasons, so you may need to reevaluate your paid strategy to increase your bid prices on specific keywords or audiences.

Paid advertising can do wonders for a brand, but it can get expensive, so make sure you've budgeted properly and that you've identified which ad channels your brand does best on.

BFCM COUNTDOWN

1 month before

Now that you're one month away, you've probably started seeing Cyber Monday in your dreams, right? As you quickly approach the season, and since it will begin earlier compared to past years, it's time to get creative.

Use an early bird email marketing strategy.

There's a reason your inbox is flooded during BFCM. It remains one of the channels with the highest conversion rates. This should be your biggest email of the year, so you should start your outreach long before the season starts. Here are some ideas to get you started on with your BFCM email marketing:

- Send teaser up emails in the weeks leading up to Cyber Monday. This can be a great opportunity to tease what your upcoming sales are going to be. You could even offer exclusive deals to specific customer segments, such as your loyalty program customers.
- Send thank you emails at the end of the sale. Consider sending a thank you to your customers who participated in the sale and have days after BFCM is over. This will remind customers of the positive experiences they had with your brand, and it will keep your brand top of mind any upcoming, non-BFCM offers.
- Send abandoned cart emails. Don't lose out on conversions with visitors who don't complete their order. You can set targeted, automatically triggered emails to help capture some of those abandoned cart shoppers.

Bring in the graphic designers.

Gorgeous visuals are going to end up ending the deal for many shoppers. After all, we live with our eyes first! If you don't have an in-house graphic designer or team of graphic designers, you can still make your own visuals by yourself if you've got the design chops. You'll need to create banners, text images, and product images that promote your sales. Make sure you've got your all-star content created like your life and brand depend on it.

— 4 BFCM pitfalls and how to avoid them

Why take it from us when you can hear it straight from the horse's mouth? One of our leading partners, Cart.com, is well versed in the common challenges that arise during Cyber Monday. That products have accelerated e-commerce business' growth by building powerful online stores, fulfilling products at scale, and delivering seamless customer service—all especially important during the BFCM season.

Here's what they had to say about preparing for Cyber Monday holiday success.

Common Black Friday/Cyber Monday pitfalls

As a merchant, it is a relatively simple to fall into traps. It's equally as important to avoid common (but not always obvious) pitfalls. These include:

1. Assuming your website is ready for the holiday traffic surge.
2. Not properly preparing your customer acquisition and retention plans.
3. Waiting too long to plan your merchandising and promotions.
4. Not having a reliable fulfillment solution.

Luckily for you, you can follow a few tips to ensure you side step these pitfalls, straight from the experts at Cart.com.

Quick tips for preparing for BFCM

01 FINAL

YOU ARRIVE YOUR WEBSITE READY FOR THE HOLIDAY SURGE

Tip #1: Get your catalogues, posts, and Facebook conversion events. Ensure catalogues are clean, passing correctly to Google and Facebook so that Shopping ads are not disapproved. Ensure Facebook Pixel is firing properly (and accordingly displayed as 'in stock' or 'out of stock').

Tip #2: Align promotions with inventory demand and supply. Assess your inventory pain-points (rocky, profit-margin, and merchandising strategy in order to prioritize promotions and avoid frustration—and losses) in the absence of BFCM.

Tip #3: Extend promotions. Layer in multiple promotions leading into and out of BFCM in an effort to maximize sales and stay competitive. Offer customers deals they can't get any other time of year. Consider 'buy more, save more' discounts and incentives to bump up average order values. In 2020, Cart.com saw average discounts leading into BFCM average around 20% in value, rising to 27% over the holiday weekend.

Tip #4: Reinforce your offers and their end dates throughout the site and at each stage of the checkout process to add an element of urgency.

Tip #5: Prepare your team. This might sound like an obvious one, but it's often overlooked. Set one notification alarm to make morning, 12 PM, and customer service teams aware of any site issues. Build out a communication plan, so that all teams are aware of promotions and customer frustrations which you address the issues.

02 DURING

YOU MEET THE HOLIDAY SALES YOUR MERCHANDISING AND PROMOTIONS

Tip #1: Make sure you're search ready ahead of time. In the weeks leading up to BFCM, ensure new and ongoing products are updated for relevant page titles and meta descriptions for SEO purposes. Ensure website results are SEO-friendly (from Amazon product pages and Amazon search results pages as well).

Tip #2: Increase social discovery. Social media ranks large during the holidays by as much as 20%, and even more so leading into BFCM. These crafty, however, are usually offset by average order values and higher conversion rates. Consider using Facebook and Instagram Stories, Facebook Marketplace, and Facebook's shop pixel, leveraging gift guides, email pixels, and other marketing tools. Editing consumers to pick and ship with ease (such retargeting posts for BCM promotions and feed algorithms for your conversion optimized campaigns, as long as your website. Remember to keep your ad copy and creatives fresh, and to keep your ad budgets flexible to ensure high-performer ad sets expands the "long tail" of your campaigns. Consider "Shop Now" as a specific search term for "remarketing" purposes.

Tip #3: Pop affiliates and influencers. You should be cultivating and growing your affiliate and influencer ecosystem year-round. Create an outreach campaign to notify your partner network of upcoming promotions, pitch key products, and provide your partner marketing teams with compelling creative assets for them to feature or review.

Tip #4: Create holiday gifting landing pages. Plan and curate special holiday landing pages and blog posts with gifting and search in mind, like 'Best Gifts for Instant Gaming Nerd enthusiasts' and 'Gifts under $25/$50/$100'.

Tip #5: Check your ad account balances. Make sure your affiliate platform, Google and Facebook balances and credit limits are ready to scale for Black Friday/Cyber Monday.

03 AFTER

YOUR CUSTOMER ACQUISITION AND RETENTION PLANS AREN'T PROPERLY MANAGED

Tip #1: Contact email and SMS audiences to maximize conversions. Create VIP lists of your highest value customers and offer them a bigger discount, early promotion access, or an exclusive extended day sale. Create promotion-specific landing pages for customers to stay at the top of their inboxes, as well as "Open Rates" and "Click Rates" increase.

Tip #2: Rescue abandoned carts. Remember, 80% of carts are abandoned, so you can expect that up to a big email series and show abandoned items they've left in their carts. Consider using Facebook Dynamic Product Ads and Google Criteo abandoned cart campaigns, and a combination of personalized advertising platforms to serve dynamic ads showing abandoned products.

04 ANALYSIS

YOU DIDN'T HAVE A RELIABLE FULFILLMENT SOLUTION

Tip #1: Engage a third party logistics (3PL) partner. 3PLs, like Cart.com, are equipped to handle holiday fulfillment for your direct-to-consumer, Amazon FBA, and B2B businesses. Not only will they save you time and warehouse space, but strategically distribute inventory, take carriers, and negotiated rates, and provide your customers peace of mind by offering faster shipping costs and faster delivery times.

Tip #2: Forecast demand. Consult with the 3PLs to ensure they don't overfulfill your order products and order volume with suppliers to make sure you don't have any inventory issues during the holiday season.

Tip #3: Ensure you can meet shipping deadlines and stay up to date on carrier surcharges. Carriers are continuing to modify their service level agreements and cut off dates, and often apply holiday surcharges. Communicate cut off dates to customers and work with carrier coordination emails. Check with your preferred carrier frequently for monitor changes.

Tip #4: Stock up on shipping and packing materials. Running out of materials like the can put a wench in your supply chain. Avoid running out by stocking up early.

Tip #5: Evaluate your return policy. Make sure to have a return process that is clearly communicated and easy to follow. If you partner with a 3PL like Cart.com, they will also have a reverse or efficient returns management process, including return shipping labels and tracking information.

BFCM's over... Now what?!

Congratulations! You made it through Cyber Monday. Most likely, the busy season will pass you by in a blur. After it's all over, don't forget to take a moment to debrief and reflect on how everything went. What went well? What not so well? And perhaps most importantly, what attention strategies can you employ to turn those newly earned customers into loyal, year round clients?

But don't spend too long reflecting. Because as soon as this season is over, it'll be time to think about how you're going to top this campaign next year. If this is your first BFCM, well done! You've just created a benchmark to shatter during next year's holiday season.