

2021 Ecommerce Holiday Marketing Trends Guide



The holiday shopping season is known to bring in as much as 30% of a retailer's annual sales, and 2021 is shaping up to be no different. It's estimated that this year's Black Friday and Cyber Monday shopping events alone will surpass \$10 billion in ecommerce sales.

However, the work to ensure that the holidays are a boom time for a brand starts well before the holidays themselves. Research indicates that over 40% of US consumers begin their holiday shopping before November, and a solid 20% start before October even begins. With new online marketing and omnichannel trends, the 2021 holiday shopping season is shaping up to be an exciting one. ✨

In this guide, you will find six emerging ecommerce holiday trends, tips on what to do about them, along with four ways to have a winning season.

Table of Contents

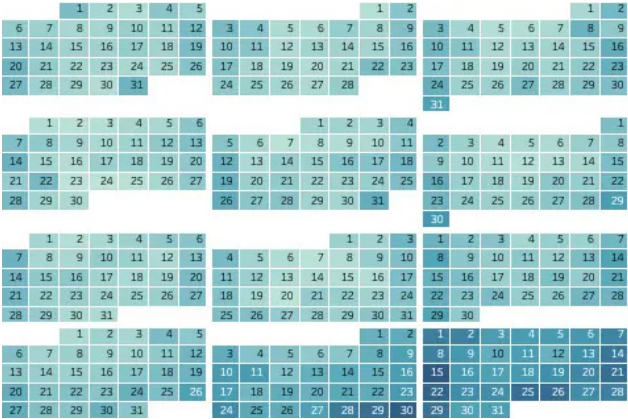
6 Emerging Market Trends for 2021's Online Holiday Sales	1
1. 2021 CPM trends will be more like 2019's trends — not 2020's	1
2. There are more online shoppers than ever before — and there are also more brands online than ever before	3
3. The holiday shopping season is here early	4
4. More shoppers will be browsing and buying from their phones	5
5. Consumers will seek out purpose-driven brands and buy emotionally in alignment with their values	6
6. Marketers will need to revise their holiday advertising campaigns to reflect changes in privacy legislation	7
4 Ways to Have a Winning Ecommerce Holiday Marketing Season	8
1. Start now, build anticipation, and market progressively and consistently	8
2. Focus on retention	10
3. Invest in customer service to help manage customer expectations	11
4. Win back more abandoned cart revenue than any season before	12

6 Emerging Market Trends for 2021's Online Holiday Sales

1. 2021 CPM trends will be more like 2019's trends — not 2020's.

While 2021 is shaping up to be a lot like 2020, and in many ways the holiday shopping season is too — one thing that's trending back to normal are CPM patterns.

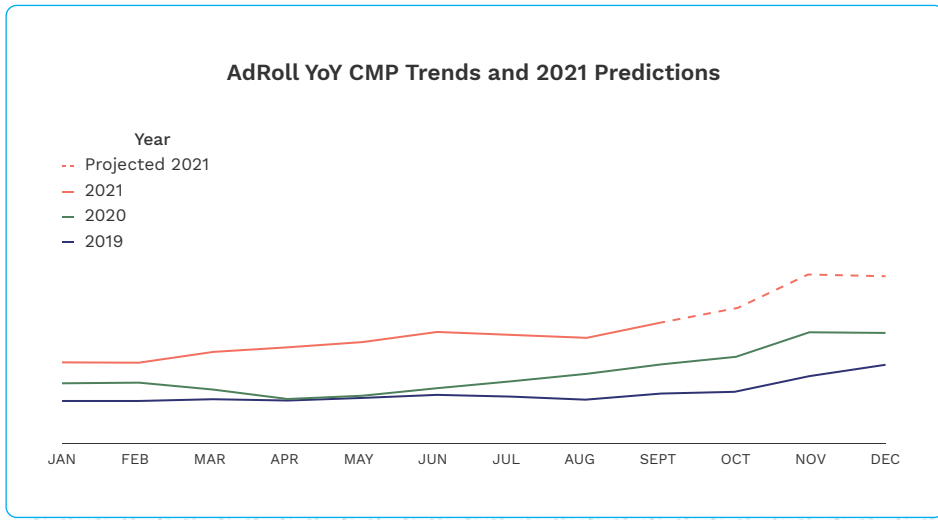
Typical years have a very well-defined pattern for CPMs. Prices are lowest in January, then rise slightly through the spring and early summer. There is another smaller dip in August, followed by a climb in September, and then a rapid acceleration to Christmas.



AdRoll CPM distribution by day for 2019



The graph below depicts AdRoll CPM trends from 2019, 2020, and through August 2021. It also forecasts through the rest of 2021. During the first eight months of this year, CPMs followed the same pattern as in 2019 and described above. Therefore, we predict that we can expect a steady climb through September and rapid acceleration to Christmas.



Pro tip: In September, double down on running brand awareness campaigns and plan your budget.

Take advantage of this time when CPMs are lower. Build up your pool of potential customers to nurture and convert in the coming months. Also, take this time to manage your advertising budget for October, November, and December — you will need to increase ad spend to avoid getting outbid.

Learn more about brand awareness [here](#) and AdRoll's brand awareness solution [here](#).



2. There are more online shoppers than ever before — and there are also more brands online than ever before.

Holiday shopping online instead of in-person was on the rise, even before the pandemic — COVID just accelerated the ecommerce industry's trajectory. Within the first four months of the pandemic, an estimated 85,000 businesses in the UK alone launched online shops or joined online marketplaces.

But COVID hasn't been a blip. It's still here and has shifted the way the world does commerce. Even with brick-and-mortar stores reopening, McKinsey reports that ecommerce sales have continued to experience "outsized growth," with online shopping remaining 35% above pre-pandemic levels and ecommerce showing more than 40% growth in the last 12 months.

However, unlike last year — when we saw many first-time digital shoppers — this year's consumers are now old hands. They know how to comparison-shop online, when to expect discount codes to hit their inboxes, and how to find the best deals.

"People have also become better at shopping online and have built up confidence for it," says Celine Cohen, Marketing Director at Tiny Tags, an ecommerce retailer that sells thoughtful personalized necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and rings. But, as Cohen points out, this improved understanding of the ecommerce sector also applies to the new and emerging competition.

"Brands that were not digital natives — but who have deep pockets — will have spent this last year educating themselves and ramping up," she says. "They will be far more savvy online, and smaller brands will have to find new, creative and meaningful tactics to reach their core customers."



Pro tip: Play to your brand's greatest strength — itself! ✨

The competition may be fierce, but your brand is too. Its identity, the relationship your customers have with it, the experiences you give them with it, and how it makes them feel is your number one asset. [Leverage the ownership you have over your brand and your customer relationships to stand out from the crowd.](#)

3. The holiday shopping season is here early.

For the last 20 years, Black Friday Cyber Monday (BFCM) has traditionally marked the beginning of the holiday shopping season, but now people shop much earlier. We are expecting browsing to increase through October and buying to accelerate from October through December.

In August 2020, Yotpo — an ecommerce marketing platform with solutions for customer reviews, loyalty, referrals, and SMS marketing — conducted [a survey](#) of 2,000 ecommerce shoppers across a range of demographics. It found that 20% of those surveyed had already started their holiday shopping — before the summer was even over. [This compares with only 8% of shoppers](#) starting their shopping before September in previous years.

[Research](#) indicates that September and October are similarly big shopping months. A 2020 survey of over 4,000 Americans found that a whopping 61% start their holiday shopping before Thanksgiving, with 38% starting before the end of October.

“We expect that trend to continue into the 2021 holiday season,” says Rosa Hu, Vice-President of Product Marketing for Yotpo.

The reason for this change? If the consumers have learned anything from last year, it’s that nothing is certain. “Consumers have ongoing concerns about delivery delays and product availability, which translates to shopping earlier for the holidays than they have in years past,” says Hu.

This fear can also prompt people to avoid BFCM altogether. One [recent study](#) even indicates that 66% of shoppers avoid purchasing on major holidays due to out-of-stock issues and potential errors in their online shopping experience.

Ecommerce retailers will stretch holiday sales and the corresponding advertising campaigns out for weeks or even months, both before and after BFCM.



Pro tip: Start your holiday marketing planning now, build anticipation, and market progressively and consistently. Peep page 8 below to learn how! 🙄

4. More shoppers will be browsing and buying from their phones.

In 2019, 57% of US consumers used a mobile retail app to learn more about a product. The following year, one in ten shoppers surveyed by Google tried a new shopping app for the first time. Meanwhile, Yotpo's research shows that time spent on mobile phones increased by 30% during the pandemic, with more than 70% of online consumers using mobile devices to shop.

These are just a handful of the countless studies demonstrating the growing importance of mobile commerce. Also known as “m-commerce,” this subcategory of ecommerce isn’t just on the rise — it’s changing consumers’ shopping behavior and underscores the importance of omnichannel marketing strategies.

“[Online shopping] will likely ramp up during the holiday season, making it necessary for brands to deliver mobile-first ecommerce customer experiences,” says Hu.



Pro tip: Shop your ecommerce store from your phone like a customer would before launching your holiday marketing campaigns.

Stepping away from your laptop, into your customer’s shoes, and shopping your store from your phone is a great way to identify points of friction. Doing this activity allows you to make mobile optimization adjustments ahead of driving mobile traffic to your online store.

[Click here](#) for a list of mobile trends to watch for this holiday season.



5. Consumers will seek out purpose-driven brands and buy emotionally in alignment with their values.

Since 2019, [Google searches](#) for “support local businesses” have grown by over 20,000%. But consumers aren’t just looking to buy locally — they also want to support purpose-driven brands as well as Black-owned, AAPI-owned, women-led, environmentally-conscious, and LGBTQIA2S+-friendly businesses.

This coincides with a period of time that consumers are more likely to be driven emotionally by their personal values to make purchase decisions. For some, this may also be the first time they’ve been with their family members in nearly two years.

According to a survey by Quantum Metric, two in three consumers expect the upcoming holiday season to be more meaningful than in years prior, with more than half of shoppers seeking out gifts that represent a personal connection with the recipient.

“Our findings show that the surge in 2020 ecommerce holiday sales wasn’t just a result of the pandemic; it signified a major shift in shopping behaviors that will continue into the upcoming season,” Mario Ciabarra, CEO of Quantum Metric, [said in a press release](#). “With emotions high, retailers need to create digital experiences that are personalized and intuitive, allowing consumers to focus less on how they shop and more on finding the best gift for friends and family.”

This year, we’re going to get what we want for the holidays — and what we need.

“We’ll see a lot more emotion in advertising campaigns across categories. Brands will be taking everything that’s happened this past year and using it to connect with consumers on a deeper level,” predicts Cohen.



Pro tip: Incorporate your brand’s values into your holiday marketing campaigns.

For example, is your audience the type who might like a portion of their purchase to be given back instead of receiving a percentage off their

order value? Does your company value time off with friends and family, and is it closed on Thanksgiving and Black Friday? Share what makes you, you.

6. Marketers will need to revise their holiday advertising campaigns to reflect changes in privacy legislation.

It might be tempting to take what worked last year and relaunch the same campaigns, but that may not be possible. That's because you may not be the only one burning cookies this year. 🍪

Throughout 2021, we've seen major changes to consumer privacy and trust legislation, which has resulted in the phasing-out of cookies and ad tracking. While ecommerce merchants can currently rely on tracking user activity through third-party data to retarget ads, this will no longer be an option in 2023.

We're sure to see changes as we head into the new year to prepare for this phasing out, so best to get ahead of the ball now. How? First-party data will become the most important data that you have access to. However, this means that you'll need to be more reliant on methods that allow you to collect data on preferences and habits, including customer retention programs (such as loyalty programs), email marketing campaigns, and social media growth and engagement.



Pro tip: Learn [how to prepare for third-party cookie deprecation](#) and have a [diverse holiday marketing campaign mix](#).





4 Ways to Have a Winning Ecommerce Holiday Marketing Season

The 2021 holiday shopping season is shaping up to be the biggest one yet for ecommerce. eMarketer predicts that the total US holiday retail sales for 2021 will rise 2.7% to 1.09 trillion, while the season's ecommerce sales will rise 11.3% to nearly \$207 billion, with ecommerce accounting for a record 18.9% of total holiday season retail sales.

By leveraging your business' customer data and industry data, you can create one of the most effective strategies for your business this holiday season. Here's how:

1. **Start now, build anticipation, and market progressively and consistently.**

With people planning their holiday shopping months in advance and making most of their purchases ahead of the BFCM weekend, smaller ecommerce brands are no longer beholden to a 72-hour frenzy where behemoths drown them out. Instead, brands have the opportunity to capture their holiday revenue by offering their promotional and give-back campaigns ahead of the curve. ✨

There are a couple of caveats, though. Our data indicates that November and early December remain the only times in the year where we see a higher average click-through rate (CTR) for ad creatives that reference "holidays" compared to other promotions. Ads that include promotions of any kind, however, remain the top performers when it comes to

engagement — and they do so at a volume that’s almost 20x as big as ads that refer to holidays. In other words? Craft appropriate ad creative messaging for each phase of the holiday shopping season.

Remember to take advantage of September and October’s lower CPMs (cost per impressions) to get in front of new shoppers and build brand awareness. As the holiday season progresses, shift your focus down the funnel and retarget existing shoppers. This is also a good time to think about [how you can get more out of your marketing channels by bringing them together](#) — like ads and emails, for example.

Given the increasing tendency towards m-commerce, you may also want to consider SMS marketing. Yotpo reports that SMS has a higher and more immediate open rate than email — upwards of 95%.

“When it comes to communicating flash sales and order updates, recovering abandoned carts, and creating a personalized customer experience, SMS is a highly effective channel,” says Hu. She recommends growing your subscriber list by offering SMS subscribers early access to BFCM sales.

Then, once November hits, roll out your official holiday-specific creative ads — these can be revised in December to focus on targeting last-minute shoppers.

This is exactly the strategy that Cohen took for Tiny Tags’ 2020 holiday marketing campaign. Leveraging AdRoll, Cohen created thoughtful awareness ads, validating retargeting ads, supportive emails, and meaningful social and charitable activities — all underpinned by media and influencer social proof.

The result? Tiny Tags’ 2020 holiday sales were up 50% compared to 2019.



Cohen’s advice? “Schedule all of your comms to begin a few weeks ahead of time, even if it’s softer messaging,” she says. “[Abandoned cart emails](#) and [AdRoll retargeting display ads](#) will also immensely contribute to your bottom line during this period.”

Learn more about Tiny Tags’ brand growth story [here](#).

2. Focus on retention.

Not focusing on retention is one of the biggest missed opportunities ecommerce merchants make during the holiday season. While a boost to your bottom line at the end of the year can be great, new customers should also help you through slower sales periods. Focusing on retention will additionally support navigating upcoming privacy challenges.

“On BFCM, there’s a push to acquire new customers, but you don’t want them to be one-time buyers. You need to have [strategies in place](#) to ensure they’ll stick around and continue to buy from your brand post-holiday,” says Hu.

In fact, a recent Yotpo survey showed that consumers have actually gotten *more* brand loyal since the pandemic hit, which is why Hu suggests creating a loyalty program.

“It’s one of the best retention strategies for turning first-time customers into [loyal brand advocates](#) and — combined with a referral program — a great tool for acquiring new customers as well,” she says. “Data is going to be your driving force. And with recent and looming changes to cookies and consumer data collection, it’s imperative that brands are collecting the metrics they need at every stage of the customer journey,” adds Hu.

Cohen describes the holiday season as “the best time of year to build brand loyalty,” and giving its audience a reason to stick around is one of Tiny Tags’ key strategies.

“By mixing short-term sales — such as VIP sales and flash sales — with emotional brand-building messaging, we ensured that our brand continued to grow well past the holidays,” says Cohen, noting that the majority of new Instagram followers the brand gained during the 2020 holiday period have continued to follow the brand.



3. Invest in customer service to help manage customer expectations.

Customers expect a [cohesive omnichannel shopping experience](#) — think frictionless shopping options like [buy now, pay later](#) (BNPL), and express checkout (Shop Pay, G Pay, etc.). After all, convenience is it for shoppers. 🛒

Convenience, however, is not enough. Remember how shoppers were burned by last year’s supply chain and shipping delays?

“Early in the pandemic, consumers cut brands a lot of slack,” says Hu. “Now that we’re more than a year into this new normal, customers are much less forgiving.”

She says this means that brands will need to have greater transparency around potential delays. Ultimately, it’s better to be conservative about delivery estimates, to better manage customer expectations — particularly when purchases are intended with gifts to be given on specific dates.

Tiny Tags experienced this challenge last year. Although its team made every effort to warn buyers, in the end, there were still unexpected delays — which Tiny Tags responded to with ramped-up customer service.

“We were able to alleviate a lot of customer stress, which is a priority for us,” says Cohen. “Excellent and responsive customer service is a smart investment for any small business, particularly around holidays when people are buying for others and need that extra security and validation that they are making the right choice.”



4. Win back more abandoned cart revenue than any season before.

Ecommerce cart abandonment rate is very high — up to 88% on average. While this may feel deflating, it's actually quite the contrary.

Many shoppers use checkout carts as a way to keep a wish list — checking back once they've budgeted, have had the chance to price check comparable retailers, and/or have received a promo code. This is exactly the kind of behavior consumers are doing to manage their holiday shopping this year. In other words, cart abandoners are an extremely high-intent population. 🛒

In fact, our recent data shows that shoppers who are targeted with both ads and emails together are [twice as likely to convert and do so twice as fast](#), which is exactly why we recommend bringing your ads and emails together this ecommerce holiday marketing season.

To learn more about abandoned cart recovery, [click here](#), and about AdRoll's Abandoned Cart Recovery Recipe, [click here](#).



This 2021 Ecommerce Holiday Marketing Trends Guide is brought to you by AdRoll in partnership with, and advocacy for, [Yotpo](#) and [Tiny Tags](#). You can find more ecommerce holiday marketing resources on [The AdRoll Blog](#).