

HOLIDAY MARKETING BASECAMP

# *Survive the Rush, Own the Season*

A full-season holiday marketing playbook for winning shoppers before, during and after Cyber Week.



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# *Survive the Rush, Own the Season*

01 Prepare Before the Rush

02 Win Discovery and Trust

03 Optimize Live Demand

04 Extend the Season

## THE FULL-SEASON PLAYBOOK

# Holiday Marketing Is a Journey, Not a Weekend

The brands that perform best during Cyber Week are usually the ones that prepared earliest, built visibility across the surfaces shoppers actually use, and entered peak season with clear decision rules for media, creative, content, local operations and measurement.



## CAMPFIRE TAKEAWAY

Holiday shoppers do not wait for Cyber Week to begin deciding. Research, comparison and audience building start earlier; discovery now happens across search, social, video, maps, reviews and AI; and the peak period itself requires active optimization. The winning plan connects those moments as one journey, then uses December and the post-holiday period to extend customer value.

## THE SEASON EXPANDS IN BOTH DIRECTIONS

Holiday marketing has expanded in both directions. Upstream, shoppers begin researching earlier, so brands need more runway to build audiences, earn search visibility, prepare local information and establish trust. Downstream, Cyber Week is not the finish line: December has its own urgency, and the customers acquired during peak can create value well beyond the first transaction.

That changes the marketing job. The plan should not be organized around one promotion or one channel. It should be organized around the questions shoppers are trying to solve at each stage, the signals that reveal their intent, and the operational reality the brand can actually deliver.

### ROUTE MAP · THE HOLIDAY JOURNEY

Late Summer - October

**"What should I buy?"**

Build mental availability, audiences, search visibility and content readiness.

Pre-peak

**"Which option is right?"**

Add proof, comparisons, reviews and fulfillment clarity.

Cyber Week

**"Is this the best option now?"**

Capture demand with clear offers, availability and active optimization.

December

**"Can I still get this in time for the holidays?"**

Shift to deadlines, pickup, local access, gift cards and certainty.

Post-holiday

**"What comes next?"**

Use purchase and engagement signals to drive loyalty, service and repeat value.

*The rest of this roadmap follows that route: prepare before demand peaks, become easy to find and trust, optimize while demand is live, and turn a seasonal transaction into the next useful customer interaction.*

01 Prepare Before the Rush

# *The Season Starts Before the Promotion*



## For many brands, the holiday season still feels like a race that begins in November.

DAC's experts see a different pattern. Holiday search demand can begin surfacing in late summer and September, while meaningful media audience-building opportunities typically emerge in late September and become pronounced in early October, roughly six to eight weeks before Cyber Week. That timing is consistent with U.S. shopper behavior: [the National Retail Federation reports](#) that roughly two in five holiday shoppers begin browsing and buying before November.



### TRAIL MARKER

Use the six-to-eight-week window to build qualified reach, create retargeting pools, capture first-party signals and test creative. By Cyber Week, the priority should be converting an audience that already knows the brand.



*By Cyber Week, the goal should be to convert an audience that has already interacted with the brand, not introduce the brand for the first time.*



**Nick Pantano**

Associate Vice President, Media, DAC



The same early start matters for search and local, but for different reasons. New gift guides, comparison resources and category content need time to be crawled, understood and surfaced by search engines and AI systems. Multi-location brands need time to confirm holiday hours, temporary closures, services, pickup and other operational details, then distribute them across listings, location pages, store locators and apps before shoppers depend on them.

### CASE STUDY | BUILD DEMAND BEFORE CYBER WEEK

An automotive service retailer started Black Friday demand-building in October. YouTube Video Reach and Shorts built the audience, Google Demand Gen re-engaged and expanded it, and Search captured demand as intent matured.

**6M** Video Views

**+10%** Search lift among exposed users

**+27%** Paid Leads



## ***Black Friday is no longer a Friday.***

Research, competitor investment and deal scouting build throughout October, while the most competitive media environment arrives later in November. Concentrating the full holiday budget into a few expensive days forces media to build awareness and close the sale at the same time.



### **TRAIL MARKER**

Last-minute media can amplify existing demand. It is much less effective at creating demand from scratch.

That distinction between creating demand and capturing it should shape the channel plan. Early in the season, awareness channels can introduce products, build familiarity and help brands get onto shoppers' consideration lists. As shoppers begin comparing options, paid social, video, display and remarketing can reinforce value and proof. Closer to Cyber Week, Search, retail and other intent-led activity should do more of the closing. Asking every channel to generate an immediate sale too early wastes the opportunity to build confidence; asking peak media to create awareness and conversion at the same time is equally inefficient.



There is also a platform reality to respect. New campaigns and major restructures need data and time to optimize. Heavy changes during Cyber Week can put campaigns back into learning just as costs and stakes peak. Complete major tests earlier, enter peak with proven structures, and reserve in-season changes for levers that improve performance without destabilizing delivery.

Organic search has a similar timing constraint. If planning starts late, switch from “build everything” to triage: strengthen pages that already rank or convert, improve internal linking and FAQs, validate structured data, and make shipping, pickup, returns and deadlines impossible to miss. For local, accuracy is non-negotiable. Incorrect hours or pickup information can waste the demand media worked to create.

Readiness is also an operating discipline, not just a publishing deadline. Before demand peaks, budgets and pacing should be approved, prospecting and retargeting audiences should already exist, channel roles should be clear, major tests should be complete, and modular creative should be ready in multiple formats and promotional versions. For multi-location brands, regular and holiday hours, temporary closures, pickup and delivery options, services, phone numbers, directions and location-specific offers need to match across listings, location pages, apps, store locators and paid landing experiences. The goal is to enter Cyber Week ready to scale and adapt, not still resolving the basics while shoppers are trying to buy.

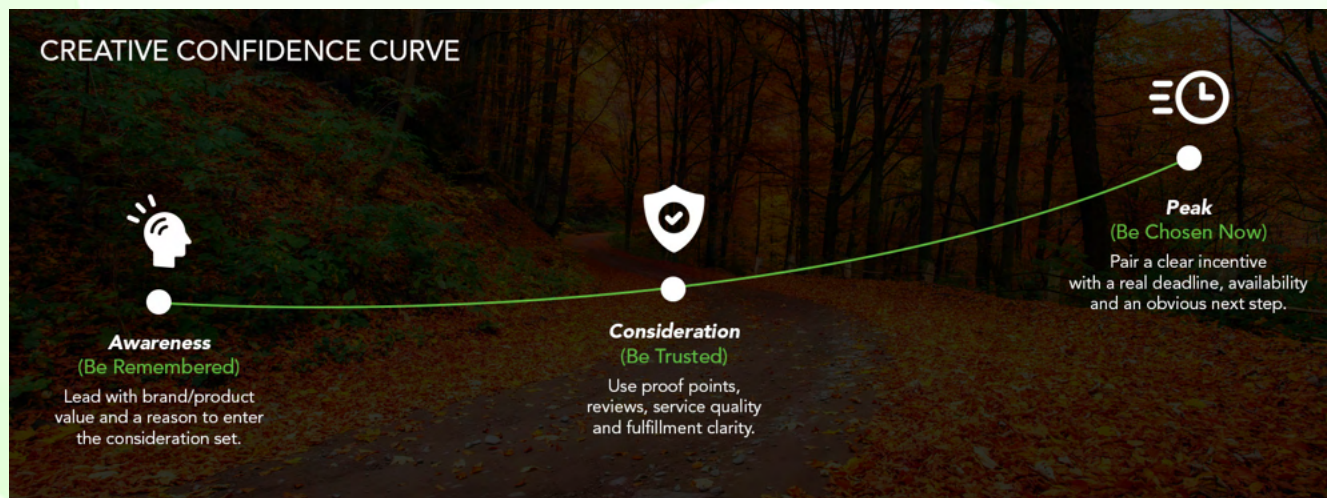
## Confidence is the conversion advantage



### TRAIL MARKER

Holiday shoppers are not only looking for deals. They are looking for confidence.

They want to know the product is right, the brand is credible, the item can arrive on time, the location is accurate and the return process will not create extra stress. That confidence is built through practical content and proof: gift guides, comparisons, product details, FAQs, reviews, shipping information, pickup options and clear policies. Reviews are especially powerful because rating, volume, recency and response quality give shoppers a fast signal of whether the brand or location is reliable. Reputation cannot be switched on in November; it needs to be cultivated throughout the year.



02 Win Discovery and Trust

*Be Easy  
to Find,  
Understand,  
and Verify*



## ***There is no single holiday shopping trail anymore.***

A shopper can move from a broad search to an AI assistant, a short video, a Reddit thread, Google Shopping, maps, reviews, a paid ad and a location page before buying. Organic rankings still matter, but the real visibility question is broader: where does the brand appear when shoppers search, compare, validate and decide? That journey is increasingly fragmented and research-heavy, so brands need consistent, useful information across the surfaces shoppers use to validate a decision.

Across those surfaces, the website remains a critical source of truth. Product, service, policy and location facts should be complete and consistent even when the conversion happens elsewhere. Search engines and AI systems are better able to corroborate claims when owned and third-party information agrees.

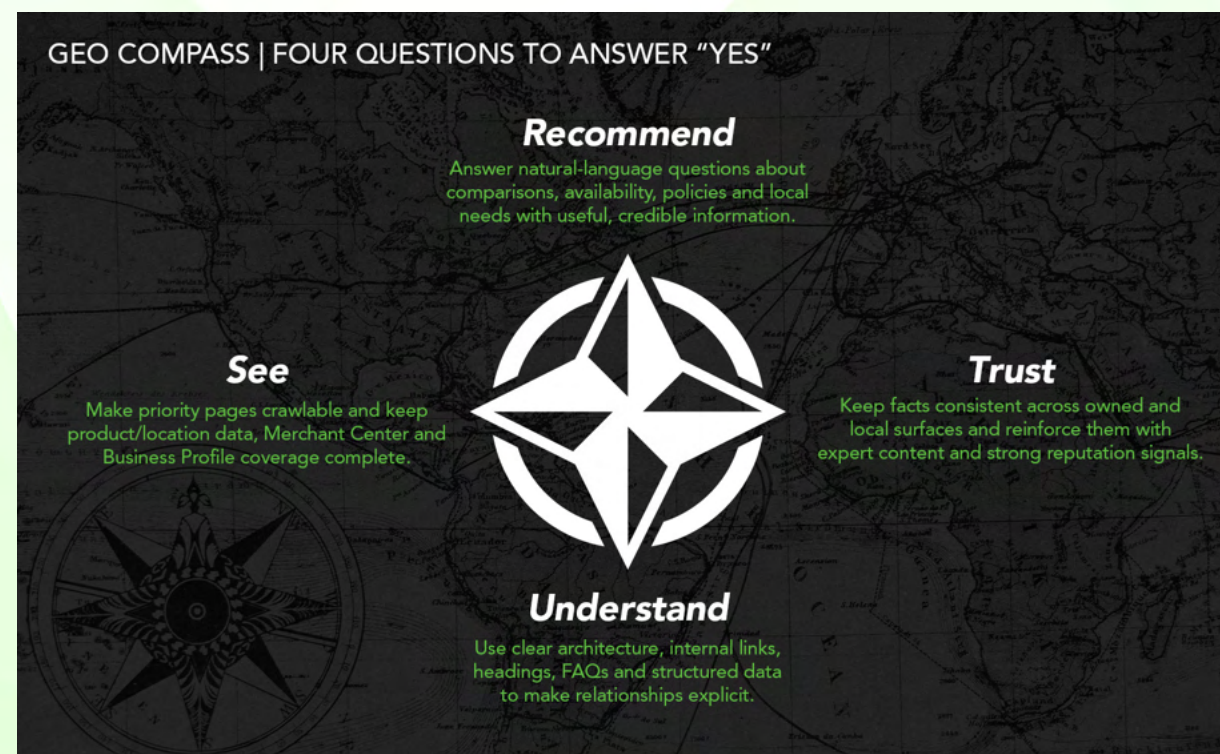
### **SEO: PROTECT AUTHORITY AND PRIORITIZE WHAT ALREADY MATTERS**

Late-season SEO should be practical. Start with the pages closest to demand and revenue: category, product, holiday offer and location pages that already rank, convert or support paid traffic. Refresh them with current offers and deadlines, improve titles and internal links, add useful FAQs, validate schema and fix indexation issues. Where possible, protect evergreen URL equity instead of creating disposable holiday pages every year.

For multi-location brands, local pages and listings are not administrative endpoints; they are search and conversion assets. Address, phone, regular and holiday hours, directions, services, pickup and delivery, booking details and location-specific offers need to be accurate and consistent across the ecosystem.

### **GEO: CAN AI SEE, UNDERSTAND, TRUST AND RECOMMEND YOU?**

DAC's experts frame Generative Engine Optimization as an extension of strong search and content strategy, not a separate magic channel. The practical test is simple: when a shopper asks an AI platform a question relevant to your business, can it see you, understand you, trust you and recommend you?





*Can an AI platform see you, understand you, trust you, and recommend you when shoppers are asking questions relevant to your business? The goal of GEO is to make sure we answer yes to every aspect of that question."*



**Kevin Jackman**  
Director, SEO, DAC



In practice, GEO still rests on familiar search fundamentals: crawlable pages, clear site architecture, unique expert-led content, complete product and location data, structured data, Merchant Center feeds, Google Business Profiles, strong internal linking, reviews and consistent facts across the web. The newer challenge is how clearly that information is structured at both page and site level so an AI system can understand relationships and verify claims. The wrong response is to flood the site with thin AI-written pages, chase artificial mentions or assume a schema tag can compensate for weak content. Better AI visibility starts with better real information.

During peak, representative AI prompts should be checked more frequently to see whether offers, products, locations and policies are being described accurately. If underlying information is incomplete or contradictory, an AI-generated answer can be incomplete or wrong at the exact moment intent is highest.

## LOCAL SEARCH OWNS THE LAST MILE

As shipping confidence drops and urgency rises, local search becomes a conversion channel. "Near me," "open now," "holiday hours," "pickup today," "same day," "in stock near me," directions, gift cards and returns are not casual research. They are signals that a shopper wants to complete the purchase now. That online-to-store behavior remains strong late in the season: [NRF's 2025 Super Saturday survey](#) found that 45% of U.S. shoppers planned to shop both in-store and online.



### HIGH-INTENT LOCAL QUERIES

near me • open now • holiday hours • pickup today • same day  
in stock near me • gift cards • returns / exchanges • directions



*Convenience is how brands win the holiday season. ... Shipping dates may have lapsed, but in-store shopping can be a life-saver for the procrastinator.*



**Kyle Harris**  
Vice President, Local Optimization, DAC



Operational accuracy is therefore part of marketing performance. Multi-location brands need a centralized source of truth, clear ownership for location fields and a coordinated process for publishing legitimate local differences without creating contradictions. Local paid media can then reinforce that reality with nearby availability, pickup, location-specific offers and store-goal campaigns.

### REPUTATION AND PAID SEARCH CLOSE THE CONFIDENCE GAP

During the holidays, shoppers make faster decisions and rely more heavily on shortcuts. Reviews are one of the most powerful. Star rating is often the fastest signal, but volume, recency, recurring themes and the quality of responses all shape confidence. The commercial impact is measurable: [Northwestern University's Spiegel Research Center](#) found that purchase likelihood for a product with five reviews was 270% higher than for one with no reviews. Negative reviews during peak should be handled quickly, calmly and with a clear resolution path. The objective is not to win an argument; it is to show future shoppers that the brand listens and knows how to respond.

Paid search plays a complementary role. Build around three sources of truth: what historically generates demand, what the current promotion prioritizes and what shoppers are showing right now. Protect proven brand and promotional demand, fund high-value categories, use non-brand and competitor activity selectively, connect local intent to local reality, and feed converting query intelligence back into SEO, GEO, landing pages and creative. Paid should fill visibility gaps, not operate in a separate lane from organic and local.

Paid and organic search should also exchange intelligence throughout the season. Paid can cover urgent gaps around new promotions, high-intent non-brand terms, competitor searches, emerging products and late-season queries where organic visibility is weak or too slow to build. In the other direction, search terms that convert can reveal the questions, categories and reassurance needs that deserve stronger SEO or GEO content. Where organic visibility is already strong, paid teams should evaluate the incremental value of additional coverage rather than paying automatically for traffic the brand may already be winning.



### 03 Optimize Live Demand

*Treat Cyber Week as  
an Operating Period,  
Not a Launch Date*



# *Once campaigns are live, conditions change quickly.*

Competitors adjust offers, inventory shifts, media costs move, creative fatigues and shoppers move from browsing to buying. The biggest mistake is treating launch as the finish line.

Teams should agree in advance on when to shift budget, scale strong performers, pause weaker activity, refresh creative or update local messaging. Speed matters, but speed is not the same as reacting to every hourly fluctuation.

Creative fatigue is one of the signals that requires judgment rather than a fixed calendar. Rising frequency paired with declining click-through rate, video engagement or conversion efficiency can indicate that an asset is wearing out, but context can change just as quickly as the creative. A teaser that works on Monday may be wrong by Friday if the offer, deadline, inventory position or urgency has changed. Refreshing creative during Cyber Week is therefore about keeping the message aligned with the shopper's reality, not simply rotating assets for the sake of novelty.

## SIGNAL BOARD | WHAT TO WATCH WHEN DEMAND IS LIVE

| Cadence | Signals                                                                                       | Why It Matters                                                           |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hourly  | Pacing, tracking, disapprovals, site/feed health, major inventory or offer changes            | Catch true operational problems before they distort performance.         |
| Daily   | CPA/ROAS, revenue, conversion rate, search terms, audiences, creative, products and locations | Make business decisions with enough data to avoid overreacting to noise. |

## MEDIA OPTIMIZATION SHOULD FOLLOW BUSINESS REALITY

During peak, media should move investment toward the audiences, products, offers and locations with the strongest chance of creating profitable growth. Prospecting still matters to keep qualified shoppers entering the funnel; retargeting, branded search and loyalty audiences can capture demand already built; non-brand activity can continue to bring in new shoppers around priority products and categories.

The optimization inputs should include margin, inventory, product availability, service capacity and location readiness. More spend will not fix a location that cannot handle additional demand or a product that is running out of stock.

### CASE STUDY | OPTIMIZE TO BUSINESS VALUE

For one automotive retailer, Shopping custom labels were used to dynamically prioritize products tied to the strongest Black Friday offer, with dedicated Performance Max asset groups supporting the same promotion. The same logic can steer investment toward in-stock, higher-margin products or locations with capacity.



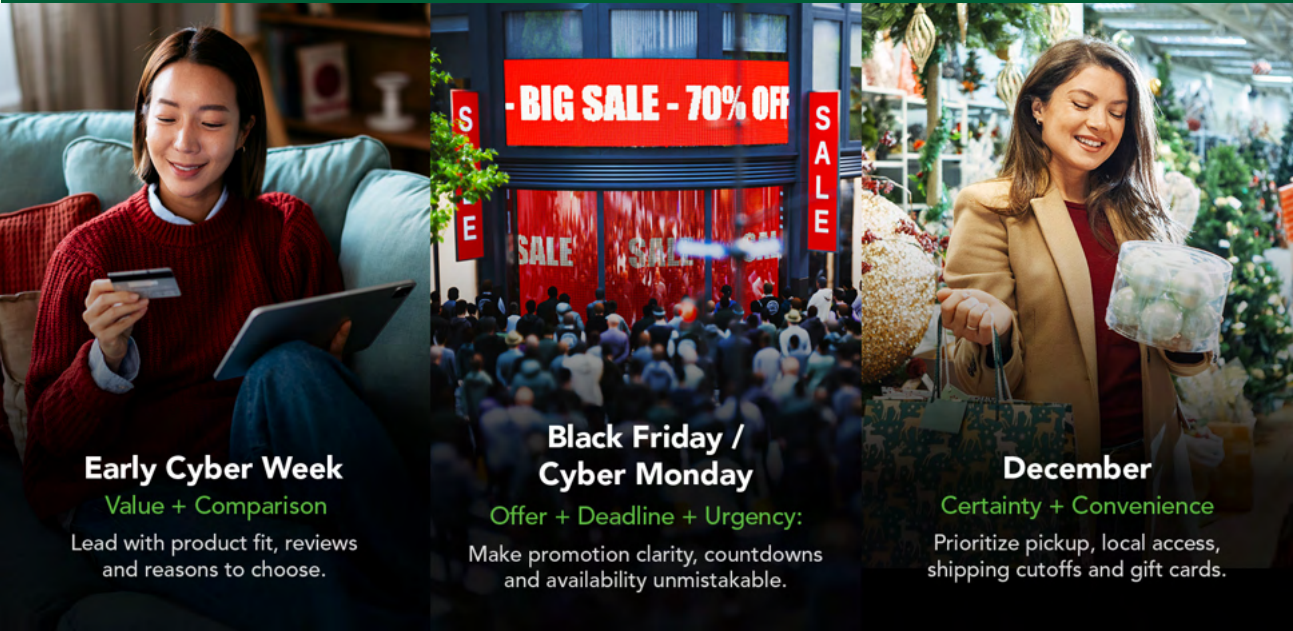
### CREATIVE SHOULD MOVE WITH THE MOMENT



Early messaging should give shoppers a reason to remember you; mid-funnel messaging should give them a reason to trust you; peak messaging should give them a reason to act now.



**Teddy Gargiulo**  
 Digital Media Director, DAC



### 03. Optimize Live Demand

The creative system should be modular enough to change offer, deadline, format and local elements without rebuilding from scratch. Search content should also prove the claim: if the ad says “convenient,” the destination needs pickup, hours, delivery and return details. Every local promise must reflect actual operating conditions.

### MEASURE WHAT CAN CHANGE A DECISION

The goal of in-season measurement is not to monitor everything because the data exists. It is to surface the signals that can still change an outcome. DAC’s experts use a practical Four Ps frame: pacing, performance, products and platform health.

| Pillar          | What to watch                                                           | Action trigger                                                      |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pacing          | Spend, budget delivery, intraday pacing                                 | Delivery materially ahead of or behind plan.                        |
| Performance     | CPA/ROAS, revenue, conversion rate, audience/query/creative performance | Efficiency moves outside goal or conversion rate drops.             |
| Products        | Priority offers, inventory, product and location performance            | A top offer surges, inventory tightens or a market/location shifts. |
| Platform health | Tracking, feeds, disapprovals, landing pages and site health            | A feed, site or tracking issue threatens delivery or data quality.  |



Search and local data belong in the same view. Landing-page performance, Merchant Center issues, local-pack visibility, AI-assisted referrals, on-site search, calls, directions, store visits, bookings, pickup actions and review trends can help teams distinguish between a media problem, a demand problem, a reputation issue and an operational constraint. DAC's [IRIS suite](#) can support that connected visibility, but the value is faster diagnosis and better decisions, not another dashboard.

The most useful dashboards connect each signal to a pre-agreed action. Pacing materially ahead or behind plan, CPA or ROAS moving outside goal, a conversion-rate drop, a priority product surging, inventory tightening or one market shifting sharply should all have an expected response. Search and on-site behavior can add context: rising queries about reviews, returns, shipping deadlines, sizing, availability or pickup, along with FAQ engagement, internal-site search and checkout exits, can reveal unresolved doubt. Local actions such as calls, directions and pickup activity show whether digital demand is translating into a location-level next step. The objective is not more reporting; it is faster diagnosis while there is still time to change the outcome.



From insight to action, IRIS combines rich data, integrated AI, and human expertise to bring clarity to modern marketing—empowering brands to execute at scale and achieve better business outcomes.

04 Extend the Season

# *December Is Not Leftover Demand*



## ***December Is Not Leftover Demand.***

December has its own shopper psychology. Some consumers miss Cyber Week. Some wait until the last minute. Others need guaranteed delivery, local pickup, gift cards, returns, exchanges or services they can access immediately. The core question shifts from “What is the best deal?” to “What can I still get, trust and complete in time?”

Media should evolve with that question. Discovery and deal messaging gives way to shipping deadlines, arrival reassurance, nearby availability, pickup, gift cards and last-minute gifting. Retargeting remains valuable for shoppers who showed interest but did not convert. Loyalty audiences should receive a more relevant reason to return than the same broad holiday offer.

The same seasonal pages can continue working if the message evolves. Replace expired Cyber Week copy with December deadlines, local access, gift cards, pickup, returns and reassurance. The experience should feel like the next stage of the same journey, not a disconnected campaign added late.

That shift from promotion to completion should be visible across media, search and local experiences. December intent becomes more practical: shipping cutoffs, delivery-by-holiday reassurance, pickup today, local availability, returns and exchanges, order tracking, warranty questions and last-minute gift ideas. Local behavior becomes more urgent at the same time, with shoppers relying on open-now information, current holiday hours, directions, phone numbers and pickup options. Expired Cyber Week messaging should disappear quickly so every touchpoint answers the question shoppers are now asking: what can I still get, where can I get it and can I trust that it will work in time?

### **TURN THE SEASON INTO NEXT YEAR'S ADVANTAGE**

Post-season reporting should explain what created demand, what captured it, what drove profitable growth and what should be tested earlier next year. A Cyber Week ROAS snapshot is not enough. Break performance down by audience, channel, creative, offer, product, location and new versus returning customer. Then use cohorts to understand average order value, margin, repeat purchase, loyalty enrollment and post-holiday revenue.

Search analysis should show when demand started, which topics and products peaked, what questions shoppers asked, which pages earned visibility and where paid media had to compensate for organic gaps. Local analysis should identify which locations generated the strongest calls, directions, visits, bookings and pickup activity, and where demand was created but poor information, weak reviews, inventory or operational constraints prevented conversion.

### **A HOLIDAY CUSTOMER IS ONLY SEASONAL IF YOU TREAT THEM THAT WAY**

The first transaction should become the signal for the next useful interaction. First-time holiday buyers should move out of acquisition messaging and into loyalty, education, reviews or complementary offers. Non-converters can receive a final relevant offer or later win-back. Purchasers can move into cross-sell, replenishment, service reminders and next-best-product messaging. Local visitors can be retained through smooth returns, exchanges, gift-card redemption and in-person support.



Post-purchase content should solve the next problem clearly and crawlably: returns, exchanges, gift card redemption, product setup, care, sizing, troubleshooting, warranties, service appointments and loyalty enrollment. Those practical moments can be more important to long-term loyalty than the original promotion.

The audience strategy should change just as quickly after purchase. First-time holiday buyers can move into a dedicated first-party segment and be suppressed from acquisition messaging, then receive loyalty invitations, complementary products or services, post-purchase education, review requests or a well-timed second offer. Non-converters can receive a final relevant offer or later win-back message, while purchasers can move into cross-sell, replenishment, service reminders and next-best-product messaging based on what they actually bought. Returns, exchanges and in-person support are part of that retention experience too: a smooth post-holiday interaction can reinforce trust long after the promotional moment has passed.

# The Holiday Marketing Readiness Playbook

- ☐ Map the full shopper journey before building the promotional calendar.
- ☐ Build audiences and first-party signals six to eight weeks ahead of Cyber Week where possible.
- ☐ Complete major media tests and prepare modular creative before peak.
- ☐ Refresh priority holiday, product, category, FAQ and location pages early.
- ☐ Keep product, shipping, pickup, returns, availability and deadlines clear and consistent.
- ☐ Treat local hours, services, inventory cues and pickup details as conversion-critical data.
- ☐ Use reviews as a discoverability, trust and conversion input; establish response ownership before peak.
- ☐ Align paid search with organic gaps, high-value categories, local intent and current promotions.
- ☐ Define hourly operational checks and daily performance reviews before Cyber Week begins.
- ☐ Use margin, inventory, product availability and location readiness to guide budget shifts.
- ☐ Evolve creative from value and comparison to urgency, then to December certainty and convenience.
- ☐ Track search and local signals alongside media performance so teams can diagnose the real constraint.
- ☐ Use December for local convenience, gift cards, retargeting and completion-focused messaging.
- ☐ Evaluate customer value with cohorts, repeat behavior and post-holiday revenue, not only peak ROAS.
- ☐ Turn seasonal learnings into next year's SEO, GEO, media, local and operational roadmap.

## FINAL TAKEAWAY

Holiday performance is not won by one channel working harder on Black Friday. It is won by connecting early demand creation, search and local visibility, trust signals, live optimization and post-purchase value into one operating system for the season.

# *Ready to own the season?*

DAC helps brands connect strategy, media, SEO/GEO, local optimization, reputation, creative and analytics around the full holiday shopper journey. The objective is not simply to survive the rush, but to enter peak prepared, make better decisions while demand is live and turn seasonal momentum into longer-term growth.



LET'S TALK 

[www.dacgroup.com](http://www.dacgroup.com)