

# Preparing For Peak Periods In The Ecommerce Calendar

A guide to strengthening website and app resilience in the run up to Black Friday, Cyber Monday, the holiday season and New Year sales, a product launch, the new school year...

GUIDE



# INTRODUCTION

## The rise and rise of ecommerce

The ease, convenience and speed of buying online meant that ecommerce was already on a roll long before the pandemic. Now, it looks as if lockdown has accelerated this evolution: with ecommerce bridging the gap between consumption and safety.

Even items previously regarded as being for in-store purchase only are now routinely bought online. Research by industry-watcher Retail Economics indicates that 45% of consumers are now prepared to shop online for big-ticket items such as furniture.

Couple this trend with the increasing number of busy periods on the (r)etail calendar and your website and apps have to be ready for periodic spikes in traffic. Meanwhile, the rise in mobile commerce (m-commerce) is adding a new dimension – and extra pressure – to ecommerce operations (more on this later).

## **MARKS & SPENCER REPORTS EARLY SURGE IN CHRISTMAS SPENDING**

Marks & Spencer has recorded rocketing searches for Christmas products on its website, reinforcing industry views that shoppers may spend early this festive period.

*RETAILWEEK, 22 OCTOBER 2020*

When lockdown closure of garden centres in March 2020 coincided with the start of the growing season, horticultural company Suttons Seeds had to introduce a queuing system for entry onto its website.

Meanwhile, ad hoc events such as the sudden onset of adverse weather or a consumer's partner becoming absorbed in an important sporting fixture can also spark an increase in online shopping.

While gloomy prognostications might predict a slump in spending due to the prevailing harsh economic conditions, in October 2020 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that sales were 5.5% higher than the pre-pandemic levels seen in February 2020.

Some sectors have seen profits increase during 2020. Publisher Bloomsbury (best known for the Harry Potter series) reported its best half-year profits since 2008 during lockdown, with profits jumping 60% to £4 million from February to August. Online book sales and e-book revenues were both "significantly higher".

Meanwhile, Royal Mail has announced that it is recruiting around 33,000 temporary staff over the 2020 Christmas period – two-thirds more than usual – to handle the elevated parcel volumes due to an increase in online shopping.

## **SHOPPERS DEFY ECONOMIC GLOOM**

British retail sales have continued to increase for the fifth consecutive month...The proportion of online sales was at 27.5%, compared with 20.1% reported in February.

**BBC, 23 OCTOBER 2020**

## What could possibly go wrong?

Clearly, current market conditions present any business in the ecommerce space with a huge opportunity. But I'd be misleading you if I were to suggest that the unremitting rise in online spending makes ecommerce a walk in the park. Consumers are intent on bagging a bargain and getting the best possible deal in terms of service.

Furthermore, while online sales have skyrocketed, many etailers aren't equipped to handle the increase in traffic and sales. They make common mistakes that damage their brand and put off shoppers for life.

Here are our recommendations for any ecommerce business preparing for a busy period...

- **Provide a seamless customer journey on all devices, browsers and operating systems.**

Your website or app may start out as a pillar of stability and usability, but it's not preserved in aspic. Development tends to be an organic process, with new features and functionality being released throughout the year, often at speed. You add a new video here and a new call to action there. At best, your buggy website or app starts to feel clunky and unnatural; at worst it may break under the strain of too many releases.

If your website and or app becomes plagued with issues, you miss your selling window and simply drive shoppers to other etailers. They may even take to the airwaves and voice their opinions on social media public forums or review websites such as Trustpilot, which could risk your brand reputation.

Regular testing for functionality and usability is best practice. It will check how the end-to-end user journey behaves and highlight where it's not as joined-up as it should be.

Functional testing will check your website or app across a broad range of devices and browsers (and there are over 24,000 combinations of them out there!) to ensure that it provides the optimum user experience.

As there is an overwhelming combination of screen sizes, devices and operating systems to consider, we recommend testing on as many device variations as possible to cover the largest proportion of users.

- **Ride the wave of m-commerce**

The mechanics of buying online are changing: m-commerce witnessed an immense surge in popularity throughout last year's cyber-weekend. Industry news site Internet Retailing declares emphatically that Black Friday 2019 was mobile, with 71% of UK shoppers purchasing via their smartphone.

According to software vendor Salesforce, out of the orders that were placed online globally in 2019, 56% came from mobile devices, up 35% on the previous year.

Note that this trend, fuelled by developments such as bigger screens and biometrics, was gathering momentum even before Covid-19. Now it looks set to become the norm. With payment options built into phones, impulse buying has never been easier. Don't make the mistake of underestimating the impact of m-commerce.

- **Offer all ways to pay**

Google Pay, Apple Pay, PayPal and Paypal Credit, Amazon Pay, Klarna... there's been a revolution in payment platforms, many coming with their own 'wallets'. This is on top of all the traditional payment methods, such as numerous credit/debit card options.

Your website or app must accept all the most popular online payment platforms. Don't get stuck in the dark ages; otherwise, in a changing payment landscape, you'll lose conversions just as customers are ready to press the 'buy now' button. There will be countless other retailers out there who can accommodate your prospects' preferences.

- **Build in ample scalability**

You'll need to test that your systems can take heightened pressure during the busy times. Where are the weak points? Will your website slow down or, even worse, crash completely under the strain?

Fortunately, you should be able to do a load test, and extrapolate from that to assess the impact of a larger load and how your systems would perform in the face of explosive demand.

As a rule of thumb, retailers have seen a fourfold year-on-year increase in recent times, but the jury is out for 2020, with some predicting as much as a ten-fold increase. It's best to be prepared.

- **Don't over-promise**

Whether it's the opening minutes of Black Friday or the launch of a new product, it's likely that your ecommerce operation will experience a 'power hour' when traffic on your website or app will be at its peak. For example, the last Xbox sold out worldwide in the first hour.

In fact, in some cases, we're talking about 'power seconds', with demand being completely front-loaded.

How do you ensure your website or app can cope with being hammered during this short, sharp surge in traffic? You may have planned in extra cloud capacity that can flex with demand, but will all your functionality and features behave as expected when they're being hit by thousands, or millions, of customers simultaneously?

In the millisecond between a customer viewing an item marked as being in stock and adding it to their basket, a product may disappear from the shelves. You've raised hopes only to dash them.

A leading toy company experienced 50,000 hits in the first 20 seconds of launching the latest must-have action figure. We helped them to manage the customer journey to avoid disappointing customers (and their offspring). No payments were taken until it could be categorically confirmed that the toy was indeed still available to buy.

And how do you offer a graceful solution if the customer misses the boat? Again, testing the customer journey helps in formulating alternatives: offering the ability to pre-order and be first in line when new stock comes in perhaps, or suggesting sensible alternatives.

- **Minimise changes to your website or app**

We strongly advise that you consider a code freeze some weeks in advance of any major online shopping event. The danger is that if you release new code during the countdown, this introduces bugs, which then require a patch even closer to the Big Day. All this impacts the stability of your website or app when it's under pressure.

Working backwards, draw a line in the sand, after which only must-have priority #1 changes are made to the live production environment. Your app or website can then be tested post-implementation to check that the last release is sound and will perform well when you need it to.

For example, we would advise a code freeze before the end of October in preparation for Black Friday at the end of November. Any other releases should then be confined to the test environment for the duration.

- **Plan for the worst**

What happens if, despite all your best efforts, your website or app crashes? It's not only sales on the day that suffer; your reputation could be permanently tarnished, with a knock-on effect on future sales.

Consumers are not a very forgiving bunch: in its future of CX report, PwC surveyed 15,000 consumers and found that 1 in 3 customers will leave a brand they love after just one bad experience, while 92% would completely abandon a company after two or three negative interactions.

It would seem that their patience is exhausted even more quickly online: according to MarketingBulldog, 79% of customers who report dissatisfaction with website performance are less likely to buy from the same site in future.

## **What is your strategy for averting disaster?**

Questions to ask:

- Do we have a backup and recovery protocol with defined service level agreements?
- Have we modelled what disaster looks like, with different worst-case scenarios?
- Have we scheduled key people to be available during the expected spike in demand to react quickly to problems as they start to emerge?
- Do we have support mechanisms in place for frustrated customers (such as FAQs or a chatbot) or do we leave them to work out for themselves that there's a problem?
- Is our communication strategy and social media response prepped and ready to go if a significant problem occurs?

## **CURRYS PC WORLD HIT BY BLACK FRIDAY BLACKOUT AS WEBSITE 'CRASHES' LEAVING SHOPPERS FURIOUS**

Shoppers looking for a deal were left furious as the Currys PC World website reportedly crashed when the Black Friday sales started. After flocking to the website, shoppers complained of website crashes, long loading times and incorrect prices.

A spokesman for the company said: “Due to high levels of demand for our Black Friday offers which launched last night, our website experienced some temporary issues. It was running as usual again within 15 minutes.”

But disappointed bargain hunters soon flooded social media with complaints.

*EVENING STANDARD, 29 NOVEMBER 2019*

### **To sum up...**

The key to managing peak periods is to prepare early and follow the above steps to ensure website and app resilience. Then if, despite all your planning, the unexpected does happen, make sure you have a service recovery plan.

Ensure, too, that you send out timely restock alerts and keep customers posted throughout. It's the not knowing that customers find unacceptable.

If something stops the conversion, make sure you have abandoned basket trigger emails at the ready for when normal service is resumed, with a possible discount for any inconvenience. Activate a queuing system if your site cannot cope with load and have your customer service team standing by.

For more information on maximising your digital performance, visit [www.digivante.com](http://www.digivante.com)