

A Holiday Guide to eCommerce

With the holidays fast approaching many eCommerce companies are preparing their websites for the busiest time of the year. In order to ensure success, early preparation is everything. According to our website professionals at A2 Hosting, there are three areas to focus on for a smooth holiday experience for your eCommerce website: backend and technical website improvements, front-end website optimizations, and the implementation of a strong digital marketing strategy. To help our

customers achieve success we have put together this ebook that will show you how to master each of these three areas and thrive this year during the holiday shopping rush.

Backend & Technical Improvements

As all eCommerce business owners begin to buckle down and get ready for the upcoming holiday season many are focused on bringing new traffic to their sites to take advantage of the increased

spending during Q4. But what happens when your site isn't ready for the traffic and crashes in the middle of your biggest Black Friday Sale of the year? We want to make sure your website is fast and ready to receive all the new visitors coming your way. Here are some of our team's top technical tips to make sure your site is ready this season!

Stay Up to Date with Updates

Keeping your website up-to-date is one of the most important maintenance techniques for your eCommerce site. Before the holiday traffic starts, be sure to have all the latest updates installed – both for the CMS itself and any plugins/modules/add-ons that you already have installed. Luckily for all the website owners out there, it is easy to automate this process by signing up for [automatic updates for major and minor releases of WordPress](#) core and plugins. You also have the option to receive email notifications anytime there is a new release available. These updates will provide additional functionality, performance boosts, and patches for known security vulnerabilities. It's important to verify these updates for compatibility with your combination of plugins and server configuration before updating your production site. This makes sure you don't update and accidentally break your site.

Identify Your Resource Weaknesses

One of the secret tips to keeping your eCommerce website functioning smoothly is making sure you're not

approaching your resource limits. You should ask yourself...Have you looked at your traffic from last year? Did you run into any issues during your big sales? If so it may be important to check to see if you should move to a plan with more resources to help support a smoother customer experience. Not sure what resources to look at? Here are four important ones to check:

- **Disk Space:** This refers to the amount of room on your account to store files, including all of your text, code, and images.
- **Memory Usage (RAM):** RAM stores working data and is a vital part of a computer's performance. A2 Hosting's RAM options on our VPS and Dedicated plans range anywhere from 4GB to 128 GB DDR4 ECC, so we have options for any sized website!
- **CPU Usage:** This is the central processing unit that processes and runs instructions. We offer the choice of AMD and Intel CPUs on our [Dedicated plans!](#)
- **Inode Usage:** This correlates with how many files you can store on your website. If you're an eCommerce company with lots of files it may be important to get a plan with access to more inodes. Read our knowledge base articles to learn more about [how to manage your inode count](#).

If you're nearing the maximum usage afforded to your current plan we encourage you to upgrade! Interested in going even faster? Check out A2 Turbo, available on most plans! Confused about what all the web hosting resources are? Check out this blog on [four web hosting resources](#) to consider when choosing your hosting plan.

Try a CDN

That's right, that CDN you've been debating? Now is the time to go for it. But what is a CDN? A CDN, or Content Delivery Network, works by utilizing dispersed servers. They use a global network of servers to store static assets for your web page, such as images, at multiple locations closer to the visitor to your site. Not only does this reduce load time as the assets are being delivered from a closer physical location to the customer, but this also reduces the load on your server as it does not need to service that portion of the request. This way visitors from around the world can access your site and all of its information from a server that is closer to them. Here's a list of the benefits of using a CDN:

- Faster loading speed
- Boost in reliability and response time
- Better global reach
- Increased number of users at one time
- DDoS protection

A2 Hosting offers [Cloudflare](#), a popular CDN, for our customers' use.

Cache, Cache, Cache

Caching is a great way to speed up your site! Caching stores your web pages in memory, so the server can serve them very quickly, instead of fetching them from the disk each time. This is a way for your site to generate static html versions of dynamic pages that are frequently requested. Caching significantly reduces the load placed



on the server to deliver that page as well as speeding up response times. Most web frameworks offer this as an option either directly integrated in the framework or as an additional plugin. Ensuring caching is enabled can make an enormous difference on the amount of traffic and number of concurrent users your site can handle. Our A2 Turbo plans come with Litespeed caching preinstalled! Read our knowledge base article to learn how to [use Litespeed on your site](#).

Improve Your Database Indexing

A frequently disregarded aspect of website performance and scaling is the database itself. Databases include many options to make performance better and one of the most critical is ensuring you have good indexes in your databases. A lack of indexes, or poorly designed indexes, can increase the time it takes to execute a database query by an order of magnitude. Creating basic indexes is relatively simple and optimizing indexes for your specific use case is something your web developer can typically do for you. Similarly, it is important to make sure any database queries you are running are well written. It is very easy to write a poor database query during testing or development just to get things working and it is vital to go back later and ensure the query is written as tightly as possible to eliminate unnecessary operations to get the data you actually need.

Traffic Control

How many visitors can view your site? Only as many as your server will handle. This is why it is imperative to ensure that you have fast and reliable hosting. If you frequently experience drops in connection or other general server issues, now is the time to switch to a fast, reliable server. If you're looking for 99.9% uptime, [turbo speeds](#), and 24/7 guru crew support check out our plans available at A2 Hosting.

Upgrade Your Hardware Stack

You can upgrade the hardware stack powering your website to provide additional resources. A2 Hosting provides an extensive array of packages designed to meet your hosting needs. Our turbo packages are perfect for handling holiday traffic surges. These servers include NVME SSD drives for lightning-fast disk operations, Litespeed web server for dramatically improved page load times, and AMD EPYC CPUs for very high concurrency to handle the flood of holiday visitors. We also have VPS and dedicated server options for those extremely busy websites to ensure your server is not the limiting factor to your business growth during this holiday season.

Security

Security is a must if you don't want your site becoming unresponsive, or worse, displaying undesirable content. Aside from running updates on the CMS and plugins, [removing unused plugins](#) and themes from your site will

help reduce potential vulnerabilities.

Install an SSL

All traffic that provides users a way to send any type of information to your site should be secured over HTTPS with a [valid SSL](#). A2 Hosting offers both free and paid versions of different SSLs. To learn the pros and cons of each [read this blog](#). Using an SSL Certificate will help protect your users' information. The presence of this certificate will help verify your identity to any potential customers and let them know that there's an encrypted connection when transmitting their information. The great part about paying for an [upgraded SSL](#) with A2 Hosting is added security and the benefits of displaying a trust badge. These are symbols you can add to your site that will assure customers that their information is secure and your site is trustworthy (it also avoids the nasty "Unsecured" message that browsers display that makes users worried).

Check Your Authorized Users

You'll also want to check on your list of authorized administrators/content editors. If you've had turnover at the company or previous contractors who have completed work on your site, double-check that their permissions have been removed by reducing their permissions, or deactivating their accounts (this applies to the CMS, as well as any server access that you may have given them). If the system provides for 2-Factor authentication, be sure you update your staff about these settings. Make sure they are aware of the new requirement, that they have their authentication setup, and that each user account is configured to require 2FA.



Increase Your Payment Security

Online security has always been important but in 2021 it's absolutely essential. You want your information and your customer's information to be safe and secure to help build consumer trust. Make sure you implement these strategies to help secure your site before the holiday sales:

Implement an Address Verification Service (AVS)

Don't let those suspicious credit card transactions get by you! An AVS is a fraud prevention system that will help your eCommerce store limit its fraud and chargebacks.

Require Card Verification Value (CVV)

The CVV is the little number on the back of debit cards. By requiring customers to enter this information when trying to check out, you can add an extra level of security to every transaction.

Make Sure Everything Works As Expected

Testing your key systems to make sure everything you are relying on to go right is a critical point. If you're in eCommerce, double-check your payment processing is running smoothly. You most likely have email notifications from your site either to customers (sending out updates,

responding to contact submissions, order confirmations, etc) or to your staff (notifications of contact submissions, orders received, etc) - you'll want to make sure these are being received by their intended target. Just because your site says it's sending the message, doesn't necessarily mean the customers are receiving the messages. All notifications should have some way of retrieving the same information (contact submissions should be stored in the CMS as well as the staff email notification). Here's our Knowledge Base section on [web testing and development](#) to help you get started!

Code Freeze

Your site should be well developed ahead of time to accommodate any changes you want to see during the holidays. By implementing a code freeze, you increase the reliability of your site by reducing the impact of your changes to the underlying system. This will require some advanced planning regarding what you will want from your website.

Have a Disaster Recovery Plan

Having a disaster recovery plan in place before you need it is critical in recovering from any unseen website disasters that may occur. At the very minimum, you'll want [local backups](#) of your database and the site files. If you're able to get offsite backups too that's even better!

The second half of your recovery plan is knowing [how to restore the backups](#). It's just as important to know how to restore your backups as it is to make sure you have them.

Front End Website Optimizations

Getting ready for the holiday shopping season and looking to make some changes to your site? Well look no further, we have a list of great optimizations to help you thrive during Q4. Read more to learn about how we recommend you tweak your online store for success!

Choose the Right Hosting Company and Hosting Plan

Choosing the right host for your site is an essential part of speeding up your website. Our turbo plans at A2 Hosting are 20x faster with 99.9% uptime! Once you've found the right host make sure you're on the right sized plan for your needs. Don't run your large eCommerce site with heavy traffic on a [shared server](#) because it may not be able to handle the number of resources you'll need, especially on heavy traffic days like Black Friday. We recommend a [VPS](#) or [Dedicated](#) plan if possible.

Use A2 Optimized

These days 47% of customers expect a website to load in two seconds or less. The internet is full of opportunities to shop around and if users have to wait, they may abandon your site for another one with similar products. Website speed is affected by many different factors. One big thing that could be affecting yours is your resource usage is too high for your current plan. Some factors

that could be affecting this are images, JavaScript, and CSS files. [Images should be compressed](#), and [JavaScript and CSS files should be minified](#) and combined if possible.

Image Optimization

Another area to consider is optimizing your images for web delivery. Modern cameras and even cell phones take very high-resolution images. These images can be very large resulting in slow page load times. We recommend either getting rid of them or compressing them so they take less time to load. Most web frameworks include tools to generate efficient thumbnail images as well as render high-resolution images at a lower resolution better suited to web delivery.

Go for Mobile

Many years ago - designs of websites changed to be designed mobile-first because of the shift to mobile devices so this one is likely already covered...but if not, you'll want to work on this. If your site is not accessible from a mobile device, you will be missing out on potential users. Mobile-friendly sites do not need to replicate 100% of the desktop content or features, however, mobile users should not be missing out on anything critical. All the same, information should be able to be gathered and should be able to do so just as easily. Navigation around the site should be smooth for mobile users without having to do complicated gestures. [Here's a blog](#) to help you through the steps of testing if your site is mobile-friendly.

Informative Website Content

If you have good information all over your store this will help your customers find their answers before they resort to your online chat boxes. Here are some elements to make sure you include or edit for clarity:

- FAQ sections
- Contact us page
- Ways for customers to reach your team (live chat, phone number, email, ticket system ,etc.)
- Social platform links for customers to check out or reach you there

Importance of Call/Chat/Ticket Functionality

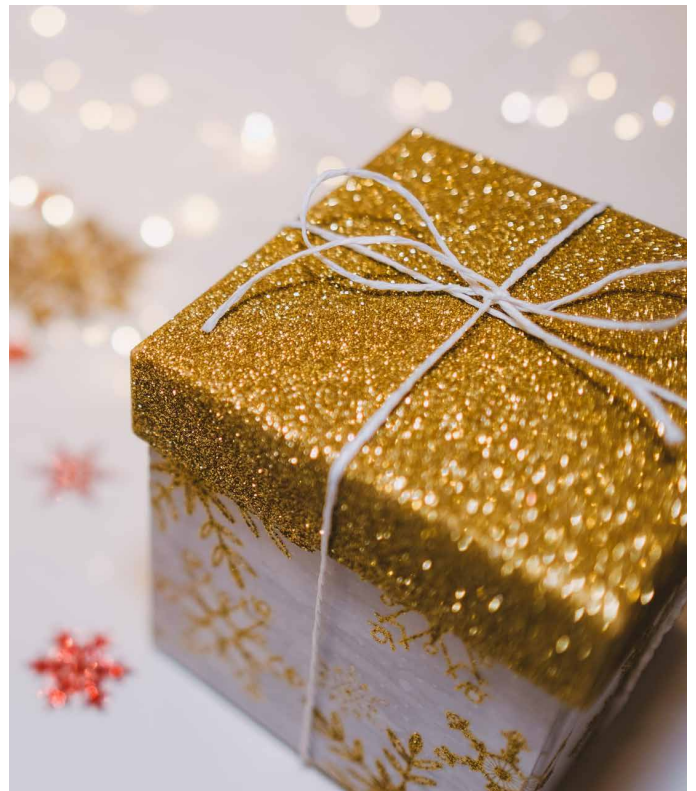
Users come to your site for one thing - they are looking to get something from you - that is either information or a product. Your job is to make that as easy as possible. Hopefully, by now, your site is fast, reliable, mobile-friendly, and you've checked to make sure everything is working as planned - but sometimes you just can't predict what your users are going to need. Adding a Support/Chat/Ticket feature to your website gives you an easy way of allowing users to contact you and receive a timely response. Users don't have too much patience when it comes to getting feedback and this option gives them a way to contact you on their own terms.

Many times when a user is extremely frustrated they may want someone to walk them through a fix. That's when having a calling system comes into play. There's nothing like having

someone fix a problem step by step over the phone, especially when you've tried everything and are very frustrated. Adding this functionality to your business gives users a chance to connect with the people behind a brand, which can be vital when building brand loyalty.

Give Some Love to Your Sales Team and Instructional Content

A lot of the time the people behind your phone and chat lines are having the most frequent interactions with your customers. That's why it's important to ensure they have a lot of training not only on your product but also on who may want to buy it and why. Taking extra time to address your clients' questions now can go a long way when it comes to building a relationship and creating a repeat customer. Investing in interaction now with a potential client could lead to a fruitful relationship for you both in the future.



Adding a human element to a website can help potential clients feel more comfortable and be more willing to make a purchase. Creating an open line of communication with your potential clients for further discussion is very important during the customer buying process. Once that line of communication is opened, it's time to start thinking about conversations with potential clients. When discussing options with clients, take the time to get to know them and their situation. The reasons they're shopping with you will vary, and each individual interaction should be given the proper attention and assistance to help find the right solution. The goal here isn't just to answer generic questions about a product or sell the most expensive option available. Instead, try to find out:

- why the client is looking to make a purchase
- if they have any particular pain points
- what is the reason they're interested in your product

By investing the time to properly understand the client, it'll help set up future interactions and hopefully create a long-term relationship. In the days of internet selling and fast purchases, the human element can be the difference between a client purchasing from you or another retailer. While these tips may be simple, the fundamentals of human interaction can often have the largest impact.

Write More Effective Product Descriptions

Determine Your Target Customer

Before you can begin writing the perfect product descriptions for your customers you need to identify who they are and empathize with them. If you don't know who your target customer is, you won't be able to write proper descriptions and your efforts will fall short of the mark.

You can do this by using the 80/20 rule. On average, 80% of sales come from 20% of your customers. If you're trying to narrow down and find your target audience it would make sense to start by examining the top 20% of those who purchase from you already. To begin, use past purchasing data and gather customer profiles of your top 20% of customers. Now examine these profiles and look for patterns in their demographics and psychographics. Use these patterns to create personas. Personas are fictional customers that you can give a name, sex, age, career etc. By visualizing your customers in this way it is easier to write directly to them and create product descriptions that they would find appealing.

Show and Not Tell

When writing product descriptions, it's important to remember to use clear and descriptive language. You need to show your customers the benefits of your products rather than just telling them what they are. For example, for a service product don't just tell your customer, "Our _____ service is reliable." Instead, show them how reliable it is in your description: "Our _____ service is backed by an uncompromising Service Level Agreement that guarantees 99.9%

uptime, a support staff with expert admins availability 24/7/365, and a 30-day hassle-free 100% money-back guarantee.”

Improve Your SEO

While high-quality images are important, search engines can't see images – or not yet anyway. Images of your products may speak 1,000 words to your target customers and convey the emotion you're trying to share, but they do little for SEO (Search Engine Optimization). To get your site to rank and become visible to potential customers, you must include product descriptions that are loaded with potential keywords. That way your site will begin to rank for related words to your products and your site will show up in more relevant google searches.

Make Your Descriptions Uniquely Yours

The bottom line is, your brand needs to be authentically itself and your product descriptions should embody this. To get noticed, your description copy needs to break through any commoditization noise that may surround your product. Don't just look at your competition and try to write a description that's 10% better, add something unique in your product's description copy that directly taps into your brand's authentic self.

Optimize Your Checkout Process

The holidays are the best time to get quick conversions but that can be made more complicated when you have a confusing checkout process. Now is the best time to take a look at what you have and try and spruce it



up. Here are a few tips we recommend to make it as effective as possible:

- Add some urgency by including a count-down clock at the top that specifies how soon your sale is ending.
- Avoid adding in surprise costs at the end like large shipping fees. Extra costs are an issue for 60% of cart abandoners according to Optinmonster.
- Include multiple payment options. BigCommerce found that this can triple the conversion rate of your store.
- Highlight your security with a trust seal. You can purchase this with a paid [SSL Certificate](#) with A2 Hosting!
- Ask for your customers' payment information last. You want to give them some time to make sure they trust your site and have all the details of their purchase in order before they start giving you their private payment information.
- Ideally use a single-page checkout process. You want it to be relatively straightforward with as few steps as

possible. The worst thing is to have so many extraneous steps that you lose a potential conversion midway through the process.

- If you're currently running a single-page checkout, declutter your form and only have your customers fill out the most necessary information.
- If you're running a multi-page checkout try adding a progress indicator at the top of it! That way your customers can count down their progress rather than guessing how long it's going to take to actually be able to buy from your store.
- Include areas that resolve frequently asked questions. If your support team notices they're being asked the same questions all the time, include some answers. You can insert FAQ sections or flyouts with critical information that will inform your customers.

At the end of the day, you're always going to lose some of your customers during the payment process no matter how well your cart is optimized. To try and convert this lost traffic follow up with those potential customers by sending abandonment emails with special discounts. This will serve as a great reminder of your store while also giving them some incentive to purchase from it.

Digital Marketing Strategy

The holidays are right around the corner so it's a great time for

eCommerce companies to capitalize on the opportunities that come with an increase in traffic. With proper preparation, online stores can gain brand recognition and increased conversions as they sail into the new year. Read more to learn about how to crush your digital marketing strategy this upcoming holiday season.

Pricing and Promotional Techniques

Effective pricing is a science and it's never too late to start leveling up your pricing strategy game. The holidays are a great time to dive deeper into what makes pricing work and how you can use it to your advantage to increase conversions through promotions and deals. But before you begin to decide on your promotional pricing strategy, it's important to first understand some basic pricing techniques:

- **Price Skimming:** To price skim, start your prices high and then lower them as you become more competitive in the market.
- **Marketing Penetration Pricing:** When your company is first starting out, set your prices low so you are more competitive than your competition.
- **Premium Pricing:** If you have a more wealthy target audience and are selling high-quality products you can start your prices high to signal quality and luxury appeal.
- **Economy Pricing:** This is when you set lower prices and target customers who are looking to make larger savings overall.



While these are good long-term pricing strategies, you may want to implement short-term pricing and promotions for the holiday months. Here are some examples of different promotional strategies to use to encourage quick conversions.

- **Refer-a-Friend:** Tap into your clientele's social networks and use social proof to your advantage! Give your customers some type of reward if they refer their friends to your products.
- **Buy One Get One Free:** This is a great way to entice your customers to try out multiple items from your store.
- **Free Shipping:** It's always difficult to get to the checkout and see that shipping costs are going to add \$10 or more to your purchase. By swallowing this cost you may raise your overall conversion rate.
- **Free Item with Purchase of \$X**

or More: Some customers may be buying holidays gifts in bulk. This is a great way to encourage customers to buy more of your products.

- **Loss Leader:** A loss leader is when you discount a product or service lower than its production cost. Some companies use this strategy to try and attract new customers or to sell more expensive products. It can also be a smart tactic if you're trying to penetrate a new target market.

Plan Out Your Target Audience and Social Media Advertising Strategy

To ensure your promotions are a success it's important to put a lot of thought into your advertising strategy and approach it with a target audience in mind. That way it's easier to decide how you want to strategically choose the products you are featuring. When determining your product choice and targeting within your marketing campaigns, each social network has different options to choose from. Here's a list of the different types of audience segments on some of the most popular social platforms:



Facebook/Instagram:

- Location: You can choose by city, community, and country.
- Behavior: Base your ads on behavioral attributes like prior purchases or device usage.
- Demographics: Choose from different demographics like gender, age, education levels, job titles, and more.
- Interests: You can segment your audience by hobbies or traits like the type of movies they like to watch or their dietary preferences.
- Connections: This allows you to decide if your audience is currently already connected to your business or unfamiliar with your products. This can be important if you're trying to target an audience that is currently already interested in your business for an easier conversion rate.
- You can also use lookalike audiences which are created from source audiences of people that already interact with your ads! This connects you to people that are very similar to people that already follow your page.

LinkedIn:

- Job Experience: This includes job titles, seniority, job functions, member skills, and years of experience.
- Education: You can target based on degrees, subjects studied, schools attended.
- Demographics: Unlike Facebook and Instagram this is only split by

age and gender.

- Company: You have access to target audiences based on industry, company names, company followers on LinkedIn, the growth rate and company size, and company category.
- Interests and Traits: Segment your audience by your potential customer's interests, the groups they are a part of, and their traits

Twitter:

- Demographics: You can filter by location, language, device (like phone type), platform (like phone carrier), Wifi (like internet provider), age, and gender.
- Targeting Types:
 - Conversation: This is based on the content of people's tweets and conversations.
 - Event: Target people who attended various online and offline events.
 - Tweet Engager: Market to people that have organically engaged with your previous tweets.
 - Keyword: This allows you to search based on words your target audience used in previous tweets.
 - Movie and TV: If people mentioned any tv or movies this is how you would interact with them.
 - Interests: Twitter offers over 350+ present interests to choose from.
 - Look-Alikes: Like Facebook, Twitter lets you target people who behave similarly to accounts that already follow you.

YouTube:

- Audience targeting: Find people based on their interests, who they are, their daily habits, what they're looking up, and their interactions with your business. This is split up based on google analytics.
- Affinity: Reach people based on their lifestyles, passions, and habits.
- Life Events: This narrows your audiences based on milestones like graduations or getting married.
- In-Market This allows you to target people who are looking up products and businesses similar to yours.
- Custom: Craft this audience based on keyword research, URLs, and apps.
- Remarketing: This helps you reach people that have already had some sort of historical engagement with your videos.
- Detailed Demographics: This is more like the other platforms and helps you create target audiences based on shared traits like their hobbies, occupations, or ages.
- Similar Audiences: This is like the lookalike audiences from above and allows you to find people that are similar to consumers that already follow you.

Publicize Your Sales with PPC and Google Ads

Now that you have a well-thought-out marketing strategy in place it's important to promote and publicize

it! PPC and Google Ads are a great way to increase the traffic to your site. Get that keyword strategy together and start bidding on the words that are most relevant to your business. It's amazing what a good PPC strategy can do to garner traffic and conversions. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Make sure the landing page you're linking to is relevant and optimized for conversions.
- Optimize your negative keywords so your ads aren't showing up on searches that don't align with your strategy.
- Research and understand the basics of keyword matches:
 - Broad: match searches with any words or synonyms of your target words
 - Broad Match Modified: match only with searches that include all of your keywords within the query
 - Phrase Match: match only when searches use the exact phrase you are targeting plus searches that include the meaning of your keyword
 - Exact Match: match searches that have an exact keyword match and order (searches must contain all keywords in the exact order you list them plus close spelling errors)
- Adjust your bids for geotargeting. If your products are weather dependent or popular in certain areas you can adjust geotargeting spending so your ads show up to people in the most appropriate locations.
- Run mobile-centric campaigns. We recommend checking your campaign conversions by device so you can see which ones to shift to target certain users' search preferences.

Capitalize on Heavy Traffic and Grow Your Email List with Lead Gen Tactics

Lead gen, lead gen, lead gen. It's always important to keep building your mailing list with potential customers. With all the traffic you're bringing in from the holidays, now is a perfect time to implement some new tactics! Here are some ideas:

- Add a place on the homepage where they can enter their email to gain access to special mailing lists (like a newsletter).
- Implement pop-ups with places for them to submit their emails in return for different deals or discounts.
- Create an interactive quiz or tool that requires them to enter their email to get the answers.
- Create special contests where you can only enter by giving you their information.
- Provide gated offers or informative content that require an email to access.
- Offer free trials so you can collect more than just their emails.

Be Strategic About Your Email Marketing Tactics

It's important to tap into your established leads list with a well-thought-out email drip campaign. You want to make sure you're touching your pool of potential holiday shoppers more than once to remind them about your upcoming sale and create some urgency. This is a great opportunity to use some advanced email tactics like



last-chance opportunities and special offers catered to certain mailing lists. Here are a few rules of thumb to follow:

- Split your email lists into segments and groups so you can specialize the copy, graphics, and promotions displayed.
- Use perfect timing setting options when sending your emails so it lands in your customers' inbox at the time they are most likely to open it.
- Use A/B testing on your sales emails to see which strategies worked the best so you can utilize them for your next sale.
- Optimize your emails for mobile. Around 47% of emails are opened on people's phones according to email marketing firm Litmus. Here are some quick optimizations you can use:
 - Use one-column templates.
 - Increase your font size.
 - Make your call to action easy to identify, in the middle of the page,

and easy to tap.

- Measure your performance as you go by looking at open rates, click rates, and eCommerce data through UTM tracking and your email marketing providers' tools.
- Implement a last chance email list. Look at your email results a few days before the end of the sale and send a last chance email offer to some of the mailing lists with the highest open rates.
- Remind loyal customers why they subscribe: If your brand has a mission that's months in the making, the holiday season may be a great time to remind your customers of their goals outside of the products you offer. This mission may be the reason why your customers stuck around in the first place.

Some email marketing plans have begun to change since Covid-19. [Read our blog](#) to see how it may impact your strategies this year!



Ready, Set, Sell!

Now that you've worked on the back end of your website, the front end of your website, your digital marketing strategy, and everything in between, you are prepared and ready to capitalize on all of the positive things that come with the holiday season. If you have any further questions or want to ask our team about anything stated above feel free to [contact our sales and support teams!](#) We are available 24/7/365 and love talking with you!

