



# Guide to Holiday Email Marketing

How to create holiday emails your readers can't wait to open



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## Part 1 | Start planning

The holidays are nothing if not hectic. To save you time and stress this holiday season, our comprehensive how-to guide for holiday email marketing is designed to make your planning as easy as possible. Don't let the holidays pass you by without a smart email marketing plan in place.

After all, email delivers a huge range of benefits not found in other forms of marketing. In fact, it is so cost-effective that every dollar spent offers a return of \$43 (or 4,300 percent), according to the [Direct Marketing Institute](#).

Follow this guide for the holidays, and rest easy knowing you've checked one more thing off your holiday to-do list.

### Now is the time to start

Your holiday email marketing festivities don't have to wait until the end of the year. You can — and should — start planning your campaigns now.

Getting a head start on developing a seasonal email strategy is especially important for businesses that depend on holiday revenue. But early investing of thought, energy and time into assembling a substantial campaign can pay off for any brand.

To get started on your holiday emailing strategy, follow these handy tips.

#### 1. Set your goals

If your products and services are commonly given as gifts, your plan is likely to be much more promotional and comprehensive than other businesses'. A written mission statement clarifying your overall campaign goal is advisable. Naturally, your overarching goal is to make money, but breaking that down into specific sub-goals might mean driving more traffic to your store, encouraging more visitors to your website and increasing attendance at your special events.

#### 2. Revisit previous holiday campaigns

Which strategies worked well, and what could have been improved? Take a look at what you've previously done with a clear eye. Consider hard data as well as subjective evaluation. Cherry-pick the best elements, and discard the ones that didn't perform.

#### 3. Review customer data and segment your customer base

Determine whether you have enough information about your customers to create an informed campaign. If you haven't already [segmented your contact list](#), now is the time to do so.



## Helpful Resource

List segmentation can increase your open rates by up to 40 percent. To learn more about this powerful aspect of email marketing, download our free [Guide to Email List Management](#).

List segmentation can be accomplished easily via tools and metrics available within your VerticalResponse or Deluxe Email Marketing account.

The potential segmentation categories are endless, but here are some popular methods for bucketing your customer base:

- By the kinds of products they've purchased or perused
- By previous emails they've opened
- By age, gender, geography or other demographics
- By their stage in the sales funnel (awareness, evaluation or purchase)

## 4. Schedule a brainstorming session with your staff

Engage your staff to help you come up with new and creative ideas for reaching your audiences. They may have insights into customers you may not have considered. Don't hesitate to be a little more adventurous than in past years: Just because you haven't seen something done doesn't mean it can't be effective. Customers appreciate uniqueness and creativity.

## 5. Evaluate your resources

Determine whether you have enough hands on deck to handle the nuts and bolts of creating and sending your emails. Fortunately, tools such as Email Automation, available with VerticalResponse and Deluxe Email Marketing, can save you a lot of time. When you use Email Automation, you can write and schedule your emails up front, so they automatically go out at the prearranged time.

## 6. Test emails before you send

Be sure your emails render properly in multiple browsers via different email clients. VerticalResponse and Deluxe Email Marketing both feature Inbox Preview, which shows you how your emails will display on dozens of different browsers and email clients.

Keep in mind that being mobile-friendly is a must, especially when it comes to Cyber Monday sales. More than two-thirds of all emails are viewed via mobile devices, and that percentage continues to rise. Make sure your messages will scale and download quickly on every kind of device. (All of VerticalResponse's and Deluxe Email Marketing's email templates are mobile-responsive.) Take care to ensure your call to action is clear and direct, and that your links are easy to spot and click, no matter the screen size.

## 7. Review your email list

How old is it? Should some emails be removed due to bouncebacks? Avoiding spam folders is a science unto itself, involving a slew of promotion-heavy words to avoid, an appropriate ratio of copy to graphics, the length of your messages and other factors. Before embarking on heavy email



campaigning — at the holidays or otherwise — it's always wise to review your list and make sure the recipients are still valid.

## 8. Develop a cross-promotion plan

Make plans to use your website, social media and in-house media to cross-promote your email offerings, and use your logo and similar identifiers to promote your brand across channels. Your copy can include the same basic messages, but should be tweaked slightly so as to not be too repetitive.

## 9. Check your analytics tools

Finally, ensure you have the tools in place for ongoing measurement of your campaign. Advanced Reporting, available to Pro users of VerticalResponse and Deluxe Email Marketing, provides robust metrics that detail how and where your readers engage with your emails. You particularly want to keep on top of bounce rates, open rates and clicks to get a good idea of the effectiveness of your plan, and to put yourself in a position to make immediate improvements.





## Part 2 | Create timelines

Once you've set the stage for your holiday campaign, start creating timelines for getting everything done on schedule. Follow these six steps:

### 1. Assemble your tools

Familiarize yourself with the robust tools available in VerticalResponse and Deluxe Email Marketing. Take advantage of Email Automation, Landing Pages, Advanced Reporting, Inbox Preview and many more features to create email campaigns quickly and easily.

### 2. Decide which events to incorporate

Part of the fun of holiday marketing is the vast selection of events you can acknowledge and honor in your content. In general, your audiences should receive related messages several days ahead of the event or promotion in question, so they have time to plan and ship any gifts.

The most popular kickoff for holiday campaigns is during the first two weeks of November, though some businesses like to start earlier to include Halloween. After all, [40 percent of shoppers](#) start buying holiday gifts prior to Oct. 31.

### 3. Decide how often to email

Email frequency varies greatly depending on your business and, more importantly, your customers. You might send messages daily as long as you have valuable, fresh and engaging content to share that's not overly repetitive. Bombarding recipients with monotonous messages only increases your

#### Holidays and events to build a campaign around

- Halloween
- Election Day
- Veterans Day
- Thanksgiving
- Black Friday
- Small Business Saturday
- Cyber Monday
- Giving Tuesday
- Green Monday
- Free Shipping Day
- Hanukkah
- Super Saturday
- Christmas Eve
- Christmas
- Boxing Day
- Kwanzaa
- New Year's Eve
- New Year's Day



chances of being labeled spam. On the other hand, because of the number of significant events throughout the holiday season, the industry standard is to increase to several emails each week over that time period.

## 4. Establish a calendar with deadlines

Plan to stagger the email messages leading up to an event or promotion to reflect an increasing sense of urgency as it draws closer. *In our example below, instead of sending one email campaign on Cyber Monday, you could offer a sneak preview of your sale the week before, announce it fully on Sunday, promote customers' last chance to buy on Monday, and then remind them of their missed opportunity Tuesday (while also offering a teaser about your next sale).* Likewise, if you intend to host a sale or promotion that runs several days, plan to send emails during the event to remind readers that time is running out.

### November 2017

<b>Sunday</b> 19	<b>Monday</b> 20 <b>EMAIL 1:</b> Cyber Monday SNEAK PEEK	<b>Tuesday</b> 21	<b>Wednesday</b> 22	<b>Thursday</b> 23	<b>Friday</b> 24	<b>Saturday</b> 25
<b>Sunday</b> 26 <b>EMAIL 2:</b> Cyber Monday TOMORROW	<b>Monday</b> 27 <b>EMAIL 3:</b> Cyber Monday LAST CHANCE	<b>Tuesday</b> 28 <b>EMAIL 4:</b> MISSED OPP/ NEXT SALE	<b>Wednesday</b> 29	<b>Thursday</b> 30		

## 5. Determine how much time you'll need, and then plan for more

Ideally, you'll have strategic copy, subject lines and graphics pulled together and ready to roll long before holiday shopping starts to ramp up. Many companies try to plan for their upcoming campaigns four to six weeks in advance, if not earlier. This task may take longer if you're creating several different campaigns to segmented audiences, if you'll be using a graphic designer or copywriter, or if you need to secure rights to certain images. You may also need extra time if you have to clean up an outdated email list or make changes so your messages look better on mobile devices. To prevent last-minute panicking, add in a little extra time to your schedules as padding.

## 6. Divide tasks and set schedules

Once you have an overview of your project, confirm who will take care of each part of the campaign:

- Copywriting
- Selection and securing of graphics
- Design
- Broadcasting the emails
- Tracking the results

You'll also need to decide at which times to send your emails. To do that you may want to experiment with A/B testing, varying when you send out emails to determine the time of day that produces the best results with your readers.



## Part 3 | Build your emails

Before you begin emailing, consider these best practices as you choose your themes and create your messaging:

### 1. Plan for personalization

Audience segmentation may be a significant investment of time, but it's worth it. Customers are understandably annoyed when they consistently receive emails they view as irrelevant. One survey shows [68 percent](#) of readers delete such emails, 54 percent unsubscribe, 45 percent categorize them as junk or spam, 29 percent become less likely to buy the products in question, 13 percent visit the corresponding website less frequently, and 10 percent never visit that website again.

Collecting data on your audiences for segmentation purposes allows you to send out highly customized messages. Depending on the tools you're using, you might incorporate customer names or references to their job, location, hobbies, birthday, previous purchases and more. Perhaps more importantly, you can make sales pitches they're more likely to respond to, conserving marketing efforts and resources, and increasing your conversion rates. For everything you need to know about list segmentation, [download our free guide](#).

### 2. Focus on the action you want customers to take

Your messages will be highly dependent on your business, products and customer base. Different demographics respond differently to various marketing offers. Your overall goal should be to entice recipients to click on your offer, after which your copy and visuals should work to reduce or eliminate barriers to buying.

Your message might focus on holiday shipping guarantees, seasonal store hours or cluing in your subscribers to a year-end trend. In general, experts recommend incorporating only one call to action (CTA) in each email, but repeating it three times, perhaps using different words each time.

### 3. Settle on your subject matter

You're limited only by your imagination when it comes to good reasons to email your customers. While brainstorming, you might study what competitors are doing, then strive for original content that's hard for your readers to find elsewhere. Consider this list of possibilities:

- Holiday shopping guides, categorized in different ways to suit your audience. Examples include gifts for budget-conscious shoppers, for kids of different ages, for significant others or for people with different hobbies. Don't forget to talk up your trendiest or most popular items.
- Enticing photos of key products with descriptions.
- Announcements of special events and sales. Note that your offers for Black Friday, Cyber



Monday and Super Saturday should be dazzling enough to be noticed among the frenzy of other deals on those days.

- Reminders of how you beat the competition: quality, experience, service, selection, sophistication, price, convenience and so on.
- Offers of free samples.
- Holiday newsletters.
- Year-end updates about your business successes or changes.
- Notices of extended holiday hours.
- Deal-of-the-day offers (an incentive used by 28 percent of marketers).
- Holiday-themed videos, promotional or otherwise.
- Customer stories or case studies.
- Details about your free-shipping promotions (used by 39 percent of marketers).
- Reminders about shipping deadlines ahead of various holidays.
- Information about community tie-ins such as fundraisers for local nonprofits.
- Suggestions for last-minute gifts.
- Info about exclusive preview sales for VIPs and other select groups.
- Info about limited-time or limited-quantity deals.
- E-coupons or discounts (used by 21 percent of marketers).
- Details about a holiday contest or drawing.
- Info about your Groupon or LivingSocial offers.
- Incentives for joining your social media sites.
- Info about your gift card bonus promotion.

## 4. Create simple messages

Holiday shoppers are time-starved and bombarded with promotional ads. Email messages are most effective when they convey one simple thought. In general, put your primary message at the top of the email. When including more than one topic, make the copy more palatable by breaking it into subheads or bullet points, or by incorporating links that provide the details. Incorporate clear calls to action throughout your emails, perhaps via links or buttons through which readers can “Watch the Video,” “Learn More,” “Shop Now,” “Get More Info” and so on.

## 5. Craft clever subject lines

While drafting your messages, give careful thought to the subject lines, which heavily influence open rates. One study found [33 percent of email recipients](#) open email based on the subject line alone.

In general, your subject lines should be 49 characters or shorter, with the most important words to the left so they don't get cut off on a smartphone screen. Clearly state the offer, benefit or topic, and create a sense of urgency. If appropriate, add personalization or emojis. Above all, strive to be fresh, useful and interesting.

Make sure your subject lines don't mislead readers, don't include useless filler words and on't





repeat unnecessary information like your “From” name, which is already on the email. When in doubt, [www.subjectline.com](http://www.subjectline.com) can score subject lines for viability.

## 6. Choose your visual elements

Since [65 percent](#) of us are visual learners, and visuals are processed by the human brain in about one-tenth of a second, the inclusion of clear, relevant, appealing visuals is more important than you may think. Be sure your imagery is clear and placed near your most important text. If you don't have access to your own photos or images, VerticalResponse and Deluxe Email Marketing offer robust image galleries for you to pull from.

## 7. A few more things to keep in mind

As you put the finishing touches on your holiday campaigns, consider the following:

- Use a block of color in your header to draw eyes, then deploy it sparingly — primarily to signal changes of topic.
- For CTAs, studies show red buttons are clicked more frequently than green buttons. But test a variety of colors and placements with your audience.
- Serious topics (e.g., thanks to vets on Veterans Day) might be better presented with subdued colors, while playful or exciting topics might pair better with bright, vibrant hues.

### When should you schedule your emails?

Traditional thought has long centered around sending emails Tuesday through Thursday mornings between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. Conventional wisdom and past studies have shown that these hours are when many people read their emails. However, more recent studies have since pointed to other optimal times.

One cross-industry [report](#) found unique open rates averaged 21.7 percent between 8 p.m. and 11:59 p.m., and 17.6 percent between midnight and 4 a.m. Those night owls also had the highest clickthrough rates.

[Another study](#) determined mobile activity peaks between 9 p.m. and midnight, that Monday emails produce the highest ROI, and that Friday emails produce the highest clickthrough rates. Saturdays and Sundays produced the lowest sales volumes, but the highest open and clickthrough rates in this study.

Some [research](#) indicates emails are most effective within the first hours of delivery; that's when almost 24 percent of all emails are opened. Interestingly, virtually no emails are opened 24 hours or longer after they've been delivered.

Whatever you decide, remember to take into account the various November and December holidays, not to mention users' differing time zones, when setting your campaign schedule.



## Part 4 | Measure the results

Marketers who don't take advantage of the latest information-gathering techniques in their business strategies are almost certain to fall behind.

After you've segmented your contact list, you'll need to continually measure your email campaign for effectiveness. Today's measurement tools often operate in real time, so you can immediately adjust factors such as length and content, tone, design, subject matter, time and day of broadcast, or calls to action. This information will be invaluable when you're planning your next holiday campaign.

[Advanced Reporting](#), available to Pro users of VerticalResponse and Deluxe Email Marketing, provides robust metrics that detail how and where your readers engage with your emails. See where readers click, which devices they use, where they're located and more.

Knowing more about your contacts makes it easier to personalize and deliver messages they'll respond to, even within a holiday campaign already in progress.

### Wrapping up measurements

A brief explanation of some of the most important metrics:

#### Open rates

High open rates mean many of those who received your email opened it. This may be the most important metric, since it often predicts clickthrough rates, conversions and overall revenue. Improve it by boosting the relevance or appeal of your subject lines, or by segmenting your list to target customers more likely to be interested.

#### Clickthrough rates

High clickthrough rates mean a high percentage of those who open your email click on at least one link. To improve this metric embed more links, make your existing links easier to find within the email, make the link text more descriptive or concise (avoiding the generic "click here"), and ensure your links work on multiple devices. Of course, you ultimately need interesting content that compels the recipient to want to read more.

#### Conversion rates

This is a great measure of your campaign's overall effectiveness. Calculate your conversion rate by dividing the messages delivered by the messages that achieved the desired response. Depending on your goals, a good conversion rate might be 0.75 percent to 15 percent. Increase your conversions by providing a more compelling reason to take action or by creating a more effective [landing page](#).



## Forward or sharing rates

This marks the percentage of recipients who clicked on a “share this” button to post email content to a social network or send it on to a friend. It directly reflects the relevance of your content. Track these numbers to determine which topics and formats are of greatest interest to your readers.

## Revenue generated per email

Calculate this by dividing the total revenue generated by a campaign by the number of emails sent. An alternative is to compile the value of each conversion that results.

## Overall return on investment (“ROI”) percentage

This simple formula is earned revenues minus expenses, divided by expenses. You can compile it yourself by adding the cost of your email service provider to labor expenses and the costs of analytics tools being used. Revenues can be tracked via Google Analytics.

## Bounceback rates

A hard bounce is a permanently undeliverable email resulting from an invalid or defunct address. A soft bounce is only temporarily undeliverable because of a full mailbox or other computer issues. The hard variety generally comes about as a result of formatting errors, stale subscriber lists or former recipients who marked your emails as spam. If rates are high, you may wish to start a re-engagement email campaign to confirm your subscribers’ interest.

## Unsubscribe rates

This marks the percentage of recipients on your address list who formally opted to no longer receive your messages. Most likely they’re uninterested in your content, product or company, or they have become annoyed by the frequency or format of your campaigns. In general this number is questionable if it exceeds 1 percent, but it’s normal to see an increase after you begin to email several new contacts. You might approach unsubscribers about receiving only certain types of your mailings (for example, only newsletters but no promotional messages).

## Number of abuse reports

This marks the frequency with which your emails have been marked as spam by recipients complaining about the content or frequency of your mailings. If that number passes a certain threshold (perhaps five or more out of 10,000 mailings) your internet service provider may contact you with questions about your list-collection process and whether you have permission to email everyone.

## Other festive feedback

Depending on your time and resources, you might also consider emailing surveys to customers gauging their opinions about your holiday campaign. Ask them what you’re doing right, what you could be doing better, what they’d like to see from you in future offerings and more. You might even offer a discount or other exclusive promotion to those who reply.

Finally, keep an open mind regarding criticism about your campaign. Not every message will resonate with every recipient. But it’s important to find out where you’re having maximum success so that you don’t waste your time and money on ineffective marketing.



## Part 5 | Send better holiday campaigns

Even the best email intentions will go to waste if your messages aren't able to shine through the holiday clutter. The average person [receives 124 emails a day](#), while humanity as a whole gets 225 billion — and 120 billion of those are business emails. How do you make sure your messages stand out from the rest of the inbox?

### Content that's merry and bright — often with a discount

Set yourself apart from the competition by offering different content from what your competitors do. Longer pieces occasionally work, but in general provide “sticky” content. Content is sticky when it's useful, fun or humorous, and often in easy-to-digest portions that capture readers' attention and keep them coming back for more. Here are some ideas and tips:

- Most email subscribers sign up to receive offers and sales, so don't shy away from promotional discounts.
- Don't hesitate to use emotion when it's relevant, such as offering a heartfelt thanks to vets on Veterans Day.
- Send simple greetings, not commercial messages, on Thanksgiving and Christmas.
- When possible, New Year's messages should focus on products associated with a fresh start or renewed goals.
- Present information in a likeable and friendly manner so customers think of your brand the same way.
- Keep your tone conversational, and avoid sounding like a telemarketing script. Don't use technical industry jargon that might scare away the uninitiated.
- Consider offering white papers or free downloads that provide helpful information or insights to your target market.
- The word “free” has widespread appeal.
- Consider referencing content from other sites and sources to establish yourself as a source for unbiased info.
- Study your current followers for insight into how to gain new ones. Track what they're clicking on and customize opt-in invitations accordingly.
- Provide subscribers easy-to-download “cheat sheets” of information relevant to their interests or past purchases.
- Offer useful video tutorials or educational courses sent in installments, when applicable.



- Study popular sites such as BuzzFeed and note how they lure in readers with fun, short, punchy subject lines and preview text. How might you incorporate that into your own campaign?
- Do subscribers a favor by helping them solve a problem, by providing inspiration, by giving them direction toward a goal or by quickly expanding their knowledge.

## Deck the halls with design

Optimize the design of your email, noting the psychological importance of color, font and copy placement.

Humans innately associate colors with different emotions and traits, so smart marketers take advantage of this to create connotations of trust, comfort, desirability and excitement. Consider these common color associations:

**Red:** Passion, excitement or love, can stimulate breathing, heartbeats or appetites

**Pink:** Romance, femininity

**Orange:** Wackiness, excitement

**Yellow:** Optimism, playfulness, youth

**Green:** Calm, growth, rejuvenation, fertility, wealth.

**Blue:** Peace and tranquility, loyalty, productivity, coldness or depression

**Purple:** Royalty, luxury, wealth, sophistication, femininity

**Brown:** Reliability, genuineness, sadness, stability

**Black:** authority and power, luxury, stylishness, sometimes aloofness or evil

**White:** Innocence and purity, sometimes sterility

## Spread goodwill (and collect good email subscriptions) with cross-marketing

Here are 20 tips for harvesting holiday cross-marketing:

1. Solicit email subscriptions by promoting the fact that subscribers will be the first to hear about spectacular deals you're offering on major shopping days.
2. Put all your communication tools to use: Promote your email by social media, your social media by your website, your website content by email, your email by blog, etc.
3. When asking customers to opt in, don't be overly invasive. Initially ask only for email addresses and names. Once a relationship is established, you might gather more info about preferences, demographic data and so on.
4. Include opt-in messages on your business's regular transactional emails containing information about customer orders, payments, etc.
5. Include a link to your email sign-up form in every personal email signature associated with your business.
6. After receiving bounced-back emails, send postcards asking contacts to sign up again with updated email addresses.



7. Include forward-to-a-friend links in all emails to make them easier to share.
8. Design a separate landing page on your website specifically for sign-ups, touting the advantages of subscriptions and including samples to highlight their value. VerticalResponse and Deluxe Email Marketing [Landing Pages](#) are easy to create and publish in minutes, using the same editor you're familiar with from creating emails. Contact information you collect on these Landing Pages flows directly into your email lists.
9. Consider opt-in ads on your website, including sidebars, headers, footers, pop-up boxes, floating forms that move as a user scrolls down, slide-ins that show themselves halfway down a page, or "sticky" forms that follow the user as he or she scrolls. You might also place an opt-in on your website's 404 error page.
10. Offer email opt-in to anyone who has commented on your blog.
11. YouTube videos are a fun and relatively easy way to cross-market your email campaign and your business as a whole.
12. Pinterest's visual nature allows you to attract potential subscribers with enticing pins that lead to your sign-up form.
13. Add a link for your email opt-in form to the profile section of your company's social media profiles.
14. Alert your social media followers before launching your holiday email campaign, pointing out some of its key features.
15. Personally email anyone who mentions your business on social media, inviting them to opt in.
16. Publish links to your email opt-in on your LinkedIn company page and in relevant discussions on LinkedIn.
17. Create or find compelling images to post on Instagram along with opt-in invitations.
18. Stage sweepstakes drawings for new email subscribers, perhaps requiring them to follow or post about you on social media to enter.
19. Stage a contest asking customers to produce one-minute videos about why they like your product, then post them on social media and encourage others to vote by clicking on an email opt-in invitation.
20. Old-fashioned pen and paper is still a great way to solicit email addresses from customers, especially during the holidays, when foot traffic increases. Put a sign-up form near your cash registers.

## Wrapping up your holiday campaigns

Congratulations on creating, sending and tracking some excellent holiday emails! With a little bit of preparation, email campaigns can be some of your most effective tools for getting noticed during the holiday season.

As always, take stock of what works and what doesn't. Make notes now, while these observations are fresh in your mind, and then set them aside for the next holiday season. That way you can start next year's campaigns with an even greater advantage. Happy holidays!

## Additional resources

Learn more about using [landing pages for the holidays](#).

Read about [holiday marketing on a budget](#).

See how to “sleigh” your [social media campaigns](#).

Watch our webinars on [holiday marketing](#).

# Email Marketing

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