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# Forrester's 2023 Holiday Planning Guide

LESSONS FROM 2022 TO DEVELOP LONG-TERM CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND LOYALTY

Retailers depend heavily on end-of-year holiday sales, constituting a substantial portion of their annual revenue. Planning for this crucial period starts early, as evident in this report examining the 2022 holiday shopping experiences of US consumers. Sourced from Bizrate Insights, see how these findings offer valuable takeaways for retailers and brand manufacturers to strategize for the 2023 holiday season. This includes key areas such as marketing, customer service, fulfillment, and security.

**Lindsay Martinez** SVP – Sales & Business Development Bizrate Insights

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# A Retailer's Guide To The 2023 Holiday Season

### Lessons From 2022 To Develop Long-Term Customer Engagement And Loyalty

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By Nicole Murgia, Fiona Swerdlow with Melissa Parrish, Christian Jibilian, Demi Starks

Forrester

### **Summary**

For many retailers, end-of-year holiday sales account for a significant percentage of annual sales and revenue. No surprise, then, that merchants start planning early. This report reviews how US consumers experienced holiday shopping in 2022, including findings from research partner Bizrate Insights. This research helps retailers and brand manufacturers plan for the 2023 holiday season, including in areas like marketing, customer service, fulfillment, and security.

## Holiday 2022: Extended Shopping, Physical/Digital Integration, Mobile Power

According to the National Retail Federation (NRF), total US retail sales during the November and December holiday season grew 5.3% over 2021, amid continued inflation and high interest rates. Similarly, Forrester's 2022 pre-holiday season forecast predicted that sales growth would be driven by higher inflation prices, not necessarily higher sales volumes. Nevertheless, an impressive 84% of US online adults shopped during the 2022 winter holiday season.

To prepare for the end-of-year holidays in 2023, US retailers and brands should start by reviewing the lessons learned from the 2022 holiday season. These insights will help them gauge consumer sentiment and demand to plan their marketing, fulfillment, and more. As global uncertainties like inflation persist, retailers must implement technology, processes, operations, and employee experience (EX) measures to operate and adapt as needed across stores and digital touchpoints.

#### Consumers Shop For Months — And Expect Store And Digital

#### Coordination

We expect that the 2023 holiday season will be similar in key areas to 2022. Last year, we saw that holiday shopping:

- Started months in advance and, as usual, rolled right up to late December. About one-quarter of US online adults began their 2022 holiday shopping in October or earlier — a slight decrease from the 30% revealed in our 2021 data. Just about 20% waited until December to start shopping, but 73% of online adults who shopped for the winter holidays continued shopping through December. And Bizrate Insights found that 69% of online consumers planned to order earlier during the 2022 holiday shopping season because they experienced late deliveries in 2021.
- Had to accommodate many budgets. Bizrate Insights found that the majority of US online consumers expected to spend the same amount (55%) or less (25%) on gifts, decorations, and other holiday-related merchandise — and 20% expected to spend more, only a slight increase from 2021. However, those planning to spend less in 2022 most often cited "increased expenses/spending on other things" as the main reason, likely attributable to factors like rising inflation and the increase in spending during that year as a whole. According to Forrester's July 2023 data, consumer spending will bear some resemblance to last year this coming holiday

season: 44% plan to spend about the same, 24% plan to spend more, 16% plan to spend less, and 15% haven't thought about their 2023 winter holiday budget yet.

 Happened both online and in stores. Thirty-one percent of US online adults who shopped for the 2022 winter holidays said they still always avoided going into stores during that time. Bizrate Insights also found that 48% said they made at least three-quarters of their 2022 holiday purchases online, down only slightly from 49% in 2021. In addition to traditional in-store shopping, consumers are now regularly using "buy online, pick up in store" (BOPIS) options. One-quarter of US online adults who shopped for the 2022 winter holidays said they always used curbside pickup (when it was available) and 21% said they always used in-store pickup or click-and-collect during the holiday season.

#### Smartphones Are The Go-To Holiday Shopping Device

US consumers are increasingly comfortable researching and buying on their smartphone. In fact, 58% of US online adult smartphone users regularly use their smartphone to research products and services prior to purchasing (vs. 54% a year earlier). Additionally, 63% have used smartphones to make their final purchases, also up 4% from the year prior. For the 2022 holiday season, merchants must assess, test, and continually improve their smartphone offerings because consumers:

- Rely on their smartphones for big holiday shopping events. Twenty-seven percent of US online adults find out about retailer sales and promotions from mobile apps, 21% from coupons and discount apps, 15% from promotional text messages, and 11% from automatically applied promo codes within apps. Smartphones play an integral role in every part of the shopping experience, from discovery to purchase and beyond. Bizrate Insights found that 79% of US online consumers used a mobile phone to shop online on Thanksgiving weekend in 2022 up from just 54% in 2016. Furthermore, 55% also used their mobile phone to shop online during Cyber Week (the week after Thanksgiving weekend).
- Expect mobile experiences and functionality to meet many shopping needs. Bizrate Insights found that over Thanksgiving weekend, US online adults used their mobile device to make purchases (79%), browse and research products (51%), check prices (43%), and read ratings and reviews (30%). Fewer used their mobile phone to find general store information (21%) and locate retail stores (20%) than in previous years. During Cyber Week, they used their mobile devices slightly more, buying (80%) or researching (58%) products and checking prices (52%), among others.

# Make Marketing, Service, Fulfillment, And Security Agile This Holiday Season

For merchants, a successful Q4 will come down to how well they can adapt to variables like the uncertain state of today's economy and consumer sentiment. Retailers and direct-to-consumer (DTC) brand manufacturers should analyze and apply lessons from the 2022 holiday season — as well as continually monitor economic, social, and health indicators — in four specific areas: marketing, proactive information, fulfillment, and security (see Figure 1).

#### Figure 1

Four Priority Prep Areas For The 2023 Holiday Season



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#### 1. Meet And Exceed Customer Expectations With Authentic And

#### **Adaptable Marketing**

As a retailer, you're likely to spend a hefty chunk of your annual marketing budget to drive all-important holiday sales. This holiday season, use marketing tactics that enable you to:

• Segment buyer personas. Personalization is hard, and it's even more difficult during the holidays. A customer's shopping behavior shifts drastically during the gift-giving season, and a single shopping trip will include purchases that span a range of categories. Retailers and brands should use product recommendation engines that operate in real time. That way, when customers shift to the "next gift on the list," old indicators of what they were looking at are deprioritized in favor of new data that indicates they're shopping for a new type of gift or recipient.

Another solution: Simply ask your customers for whom they're shopping. Luxury cosmetics brand Aesop's online gift finder lets customers input details about the person they're buying for in exchange for personalized recommendations (see Figure 2).

- Get the most out of your loyalty program. Loyalty programs are optimal vehicles for compiling zero-party data (ZPD) personal data that a consumer will proactively share, often in exchange for some type of value. Why? Loyalty members are more willing than nonmembers to share information with your brand: 52% of US online adults who don't belong to any loyalty programs said nothing will motivate them to share more personal information with companies, vs. 29% of those who do belong to a loyalty program. For the 83% of US online adults who are loyalty program members, getting special treatment is important so show your best customers how much you value them with exclusive, personalized offers. In 2022, Target leveraged insights from its Circle loyalty program to serve three times more personalized offers. The result? Target Circle members spent three times more on average this past holiday season.
- Show that you care. Holidays can be emotionally difficult times for many customers. Empathize with your customers to better understand their needs this holiday season, and look for opportunities to show your support. More brands are offering their customers the opt-out option from holiday marketing emails because they can trigger sadness and grief for different reasons, such as the loss of a loved one. Forrester's 2022 Customer Experience Index (CX Index<sup>™</sup>) leader Chewy.com shows care for its customers with personal touches in its communications.
- Experiment with but don't rely on new platforms to reach your customers. There's much continued buzz and excitement around social commerce from the advertising and tech industry, but consumer adoption in the US simply isn't there — yet. It may be worth looking into depending on your target audience. Adoption is much higher for younger consumers: Forrester data shows that 61% of US online adults under 25 have completed a purchase inside/within a social network, compared to 29% of 45- to 54-year-olds. During the 2022 holiday season, American Eagle launched three shoppable experiences on Snapchat to reach a Gen Z audience. The company also reported seeing variations of past virtual Snapchat shops that "generated about \$2 million in revenue" each.

Aesop's Gift Finder Makes Recommendations Based On Input About The Gift Recipient



Source: Aesop website

### 2. Help Busy, Stressed Customers With Value-Add Info — At The Right Time

According to Bizrate Insights, 71% of US online consumers bought at least half of their holiday purchases online in 2022. One of the hardest parts of online shopping is the inability to physically see a product before purchasing it. To equip customers with the tools for a positive online shopping experience, retailers should:

• Elevate imagery and customer reviews for further reinforcement. One in four consumers plan to avoid in-store shopping this holiday season, per Forrester's July 2023 data. To boost consumers' confidence when they're shopping online, use high-resolution images; include images for all options if the item comes in multiple sizes or colors; and add size comparisons to common objects. Depending on the product, take it a step further with the ability to view items through augmented reality like Target (see Figure 3).

If you can't change imagery, explore boosting your customer review section: 72% of US online adults think customer ratings and reviews are an important feature for a retailer to have on their site. Sephora's review section allows customers to filter by criteria like beauty match (determined by self-provided info in your profile), customer rating, skin type and tone, shade of product used, age range, and content (if it includes photo or video or not) (see Figure 4).

- Make gifting easy to simplify the checkout process. We found that 23% of US online adults frequently had items delivered to another person's home during the 2022 winter holiday shopping season. Why? Some customers will opt for this option to send gifts to people they may not see in person during the holidays. Improve gifting features on your site by allowing customers to add gift receipts, gift wrap, or messages to their orders. Nordstrom customers can choose to add gift wrap or messages only to designated items in an order. Best Buy makes it even more convenient by allowing customers to place both personal and gift orders in one checkout (e.g., enter multiple fulfillment options) (see Figure 5).
- Use chat to bridge the in-store and digital experience. Messaging can offer a low-friction way to launch communications for click-and-collect or curbside pickup journeys, reducing calls into the store, and improving pickup logistics. Some platforms offer features that allow customers to arrange their pickup in advance and share their location so that in-store staff can prepare for their arrival and provide timely guidance on navigation to pickup locations. Additionally, if the retailer has deployed Google Business Messages, customers can send a message

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right from Google or Google Maps. But remember: If you deploy messaging on a location-based entry point like Google Maps, prepare your agents (or bots) to field location-based questions.

• Decrease website clutter and run promotions customers actually want.

Coupons, discounts, and promotions can benefit customers, but the common practice of overloading sites with promotional content detracts from the site's usability. Rather than overwhelming customers with an influx of emails and offers, focus on understanding what your customers really want. What offers would encourage them to buy more of their holiday purchases online? This past holiday season, Bizrate data shows that free shipping and discounts on total orders were among the most prized offers for US shoppers (see Figure 6). Once you determine what you'll offer, be sure to test your digital experiences on multiple device types with users to understand how they feel and establish user confidence by eliminating factors that distract or overwhelm users.

• Being aware of coercive and deceptive design patterns. Coercive and deceptive design, commonly known as "dark patterns," involves design choices that manipulate customers into acting against their own interests. Pop-up windows that are easy to misclick or difficult to turn off, forced action to accept cookies, fake countdown timers, hidden costs, and difficult subscription cancellation are just some examples. Some retail sites use coercive and deceptive design because it boosts revenues in the short term, but these practices hurt customer loyalty and put companies at risk of legal fines and reputation damage in the long term.

Target Leverages Technology For Furniture And Home Décor Categories



#### Source: Target mobile website

Sephora Offers Extensive Filtering Options For Product Ratings And Reviews

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#### Source: Sephora website

Nordstrom And Best Buy Enable Gift-Giving At The Checkout Stage



#### Source: Nordstrom website

	Send a gift message
	Include a gift message for this item
What would you like to change?	Include a gift message for this item
4 <sup>-1</sup>	▲
Item options:	
	Best Buy allows customers to ship items in the same
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Continue	makes it easy to add a gift message to an item.
Cancel and go back to checkout	
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Shipping Details Switch all	to pickup Order Summary
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#### Source: Best Buy website

Consumers Are Most Interested In Free Shipping And Discounts During The Holiday Season

# "Which of the following promotions would convince you to buy a greater percent of your 2023 holiday purchases online than you did in 2022?"

(Multiple responses accepted)



Base: 422 US online consumers Source: Bizrate Insights

#### 3. Develop Fulfillment Operations To Build Customer Delivery Confidence

In December 2022, 53% of US online adults who shopped for the 2022 winter holidays told us they frequently purchased online early to get orders on time. Still, one-third experienced estimated (promised) shipping timeframes that were longer than expected, and 31% said actual shipping times were longer than expected (i.e., deliveries were late). Retailers and brands must help customers understand the delivery options that are available to get their orders on time while managing and delivering on those expectations along the way. For the 2023 holiday season, wise merchants will leverage their order management systems (OMSes) to:

- Add details about in-store fulfillment options. Eighteen percent of US online adults plan to use in-store pickup regularly this holiday season, and 17% say the same for curbside, per Forrester's July 2023 data. Additionally, 55% of US online adults believe it's important for retailers and brands to include the estimated date and time of arrival on their website. Filters that allow consumers to view items based on color, size, or price are table stakes, but filters based on inventory level and shipping options are not yet as widely available. Making it clear upfront what products customers will be able to receive in time will improve their confidence in buying and manage their expectations overall. Both Best Buy and The Home Depot allow customers to narrow results to items available for store pickup at their selected and nearby stores (see Figure 7). And Etsy allows customers to filter by estimated delivery date (see Figure 8).
- Underpromise on delivery timing to manage expectations. Retailers must accurately manage customer expectations at any time of year. Customers need transparency about delivery timelines, clear schedules and deadlines prominently displayed, and investment in optimization technology like OMSes. That optimization enables retailers to simultaneously promise delivery timelines that they can meet and manage shipping costs during the season of peak order volume. ASOS included a shipping timeline on its site as early as Cyber Monday, while other retailers opted to send shipping reminders via email when the cutoffs got closer (see Figure 9). Target calls out during checkout that its estimated delivery date takes into account the extra time needed to complete deliveries on the weekend. J.Crew includes a notice about potential inventory changes to avoid customer disappointment if items for in-store pickup end up not being available (see Figure 10).
- Prepare for a bump in pickup orders as holidays get closer. Thirty-two percent of US online adults who have purchased items online and picked them up in a store opted to do so to avoid spending time finding the item(s) in store, and 31% wanted

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to collect their purchase the same day. Despite these time-saving motivations, during the 2022 holiday shopping season, 22% of US online adults said their instore or curbside pickup orders frequently took longer than expected. During the holiday season, especially during the last couple of weeks when customers are pressed for time and past the shipping deadlines, be sure to staff and stock to meet pickup demands.

• Reduce end-of-year shortages and overstocks. Some retailers may prioritize fulfilling orders from locations with the shortest possible distance to the customer. This plan makes sense when the goal is to find the fastest speed of shipment but not when it comes to using up inventory. In preparation for the holidays, be sure that your OMS is set to prioritize sourcing from locations where the company's demand forecasting tools predict end-of-year overstocks — and ignore locations where products are likely to run out long before the online shipping cutoff date.

Best Buy And The Home Depot Allow Customers To Select Stores To Filter By Availability

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l homedepot	t.com	<u> </u>	estbuy.com	
Customers can select (or deselect) store locations to include in their search results when filtering for items available for same-day store pickup. The Home Depot also includes exact inventory numbers for in-store products.		customers to nar available for stor select and nearb	Best Buy's "Get It Fast" filter allows customers to narrow results to items available for store pickup at their select and nearby stores as well as same-day shipping in their ZIP code.	

#### Source: The Home Depot and Best Buy mobile websites

Etsy Enables Customers To Filter By Inventory Level And Estimated Delivery Date



Source: Etsy mobile website

ASOS Was Transparent About Shipping Deadlines From The Start Of The Holiday Season

	LAST ORDER DATES FOR CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR				
	Christmas	New Years			
Next-Day Delivery	Order by 12/22/2022 before the website cut-off	Order by 12/29/2022 before the website cut-off			
Express Delivery	Order by 12/21/2022 before the website cut-off	Order by 12/28/2022 before the website cut-off			
Next-Day Click & Collect	Order by 12/22/2022 before the website cut-off	Order by 12/29/2022 before the website cut-off			
Express Click & Collect	Order by 12/21/2022 before the website cut-off	Order by 12/28/2022 before the website cut-off			
Express Click & Collect by Nordstrom	Order by 12/21/2022 before the website cut-off	Order by 12/28/2022 before the website cut-off			
	1				
ASOS provided clear shipping cutoffs as early as Cyber Monday, allowing its customers to plan their holiday shopping confidently.					

Source: ASOS website

#### Figure 10 Target And J.Crew Include Extra Detail On Their Fulfillment Messages



#### Source: J.Crew and Target mobile websites

#### 4. Increase Customer Trust By Proactively Preparing For Security

#### Scenarios

Around the holidays, return fraud is always top of mind for retailers. NRF found that " ... for every \$100 in returned merchandise accepted, retailers lose \$10.40 to return fraud." In preparation for the holiday season, retail CISOs should collaborate with their IT, marketing, and merchandising colleagues to prioritize:

• Bot management. Good bots like search engine crawlers help your business — but merchants must implement tools to combat the many bad bots that hurt their business. Think bots for web scraping (e.g., inventory and pricing data for competitive purposes) and inventory hoarding (e.g., "sneakerbots" and "grinchbots" buying up any desirable inventory).

Bot management solutions today offer a wide array of options for bot responses, including both visual and invisible challenges. Most consumers have encountered Google's reCAPTCHA at some point, and while 53% of US online adults report feeling frustrated when forced to complete a human/bot challenge, 51% also feel safer when doing so. Challenges will block bots attempting account takeover, card fraud, and web recon — all attacks that could result in a loss of customer data. In addition, seeing a challenge may give users the impression that the firm takes security seriously in other areas, too.

- Supply chain risks. The threat of bots targeting certain products is heightened during the holiday season when popular items are in high demand and often indicates supply/demand asynchrony. Retailers should be prepared for inevitable stockouts. Determine how to manually increase safety stock parameters for key value items in your replenishment systems. Analyze the feasibility of pushing scarce inventory to local stores and limiting the number of units that each shopper can buy to reduce the risk of hoarding. Be prepared to suggest in-stock alternatives to delayed or out-of-stock products. If items are out of stock, Adidas allows consumers to sign up for inventory updates and offers similar alternative options (see Figure 11). And be transparent and timely in communicating with customers about what the issues are and how long it may take to resolve them (keeping you FTC Rule-compliant).
- **Ransomware protection.** Ransomware attackers tend to target organizations that need as close to 100% uptime as possible, making retail organizations prime victims. These attacks have the ability to affect every aspect of the retail supply chain, including suppliers, logistics, operations, products, and websites. If

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attacked, a company's entire business can be upended and, depending on the scale and severity, the firm's brand image and trust from customers can take a major hit.

To best protect their company, retailers must take action, starting with informing their teams of the implications and potential signs of a ransomware attack. One way to do this is to gamify finding phishing attacks to train employees to identify and report them, as they're one of the main ways cybercriminals begin their attacks. Additionally, work with your security teams on a companywide incident response plan to simulate what you'd do in the event of an attack.

#### Figure 11 Adidas Provides Alternative Options For Its Out-Of-Stock Products



#### Source: Adidas website

# **Supplemental Material**

#### **Additional Contributors**

Gina Bhawalkar, Sandy Carielli, Kelsey Chickering, Senem Guler Biyikli, Allie Mellen, Emily Pfeiffer, Mary Pilecki, Alla Valente, Cole Walsh, and Brendan Witcher.

#### **Research Methodologies**

Forrester's research partner and voice of the customer solution provider Bizrate Insights fielded surveys of US online consumers before, during, and just after the 2022 holiday season, which it shared with Forrester for this research. The company has fielded these holiday surveys annually for many years. Bizrate Insights collects over 25 million surveys from verified customers for 2,000 retailers each year. FORRESTER

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