



SEASONAL MARKETING For Online Businesses

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Introduction

When we think of seasonal marketing, we typically think of Black Friday sales at the local mall, or January white sales at Macy's. But for online business owners, seasonal marketing is just as important.

No matter what kind of business you operate – virtual assistant, affiliate marketing, information product marketing, or even retail sales – your business undoubtedly has seasonal ebb and flow. Learning to take advantage of the seasons, whether or not they follow the norm, is the key to maximizing your profits and your advertising dollar returns.

Regardless of your business model, seasonal marketing has a number of benefits, and if you're not taking advantage of the possibilities, you're truly missing the boat.

For example, retailers who have a good seasonal marketing plan never have to wonder about how they'll advertise their goods between October and December. They know. It's Christmas after all, and they know from years of experience and from the work of other retailers who came before them what works and what doesn't. No more guessing games.

The same goes for stores selling wedding gowns. They know where and how to market their products each April when the Bride Expo comes to town. It's done-for-you marketing.

Seasonal marketing techniques are also helpful at creating urgency in your market. Because any seasonal promotion is by definition limited in length, it's easier to entice buyers to spend money today rather than waiting to see if the price goes down or if another option becomes available.

You can see this powerful technique in action on the day after Thanksgiving in the US. Customers line up in the dark hours before dawn to be first in line

for the fantastic sale prices at their favorite shop. They know time is limited, and they arrive with their wallets in hand ready to spend.

Wouldn't it be fabulous to have that kind of powerful technique available to your online business as well?

You do!

Another added benefit of seasonal marketing is the ability to "tag along" with other, bigger businesses. Your small shop can enjoy the benefits of being associated with larger promotions, simply by using similar techniques and strategies.

In this three-part eBook we're going to cover everything you need to know to put seasonal marketing to work in your online business. We'll start with defining exactly what seasonal marketing is – and is not. From there, we'll take a look at how to plan your seasonal marketing activities, and why planning ahead is critical to your success. Finally, we'll learn how to get your message out to the masses in time for your seasonal marketing to be a hit.

Ready? Let's get started!

Part One: Seasonal Marketing Defined

Simply put, seasonal marketing refers to cyclical changes in your marketing plans. Whatever events, holidays, seasons, or otherwise notable things that occur within your market are potential opportunities for seasonal marketing.

As we said, typical seasonal marketing surrounds the holiday shopping season – at least in North America. Retailers bring out the decorations, produce bunches of holiday-themed television commercials, play Christmas music, and offer deep discounts just to get you in the door. And it works, as you know if you've ever tried to find a parking space at a shopping center on a Saturday in December.

But there are many more seasons than just the one that revolves around Christmas. In fact, depending on your market and your niche, your seasonal marketing might take place in June or January – or maybe even two or three times per year.

Obviously, the first step to working out a seasonal marketing plan for your business is to intimately know your niche and your market.

Know Your Market, Know Your Seasons

For online business owners, a market is a subset of people with a common interest, while a niche is a subset of interests within that market.

For example, if you sell hand-made wedding favors, your market is brides and your niche is wedding favors. The general market "brides" can have many niches (dresses, shoes, honeymoon destinations, etc.) however, so depending on your business model, you might serve one or more niches within the same market.

Alternately, you might serve one or more markets within the same niche. For example, if you're a web designer, you might work with coaches, small retail stores, authors, or non-profits. Each of these markets has a need for a web presence, and they each have their own unique seasons.

The first step in working out a seasonal marketing plan, then, is a clear understanding of who exactly your market is, and what niche within that market you are serving.

If you've been in business for any length of time, you probably already know this information, but if you're not clear, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is my ideal customer?
- Where does she live?
- How much does she earn?
- What is her family structure?
- What is her socio-economic status?
- What is her pain point (or what problem do I aim to solve)?

Questions like these can serve to paint a very clear picture of exactly who your market is, and when you know that, you'll have a much greater understanding of the seasonal marketing techniques to which your market will respond best.

Next, brainstorm about your market and your niche, when they're most active, and which holidays and other events make a difference in their business.

Some things to consider include

- Holidays such as Christmas and Independence Day
- Seasons (winter, spring, summer, fall)
- Local events like festivals and community gatherings
- Global events such as the Olympics
- Industry-related events like trade shows
- Sporting events such as the Super Bowl or the World Series

All these events and happenings are perfect "excuses" to have a sale, special promotion, or contest to entice your customers to buy more or to draw new customers to your site.

In addition, some markets have their own busy season to consider. Some examples of market seasons are

- General Retail – Halloween to New Years
- Weight Loss – January and May
- Gardening – Early spring through late summer
- Moms – Back to school, Christmas, summer vacation
- Golfers – Spring and summer
- Internet marketers – December to March
- Gaming – Christmas
- Brides – Spring and summer
- Movie buffs – October through February

You can see that there are literally dozens of variables involved when you begin to think about seasonal marketing for your online business. Make a list of all the seasonal activities and events that might make a difference to your specific market and keep it handy. You'll need it when it comes time to develop your own marketing calendar.

Other "seasons" to be aware of in your marketing efforts are awareness months (and days or weeks). These are times set aside for promoting awareness of cultural, health, or historical issues of importance. Examples include Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October), Black History Month (February), and Mental Health Month (May).

While some are serious topics, others, like Egg Salad Week (the week following Easter, of course) are just silly and fun. But whether serious or silly, they're certainly worth taking into account when you plan your seasonal marketing. Take a look at these websites for some inspiration

- <http://www.menstuff.org/calendar/workshops/awareness.html>
- http://www.pcihealth.edu/education/Health_Awareness_Calendar.htm
- <http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=66>
- http://www.mhprofessional.com/?page=/mhp/categories/chases/content/special_months.html
- <http://www.fundraisers.com/causes/index.html>

Studying the Trends

If you get stuck thinking about the seasons of your market, there are some tools you can use to uncover relevant timeframes.

The first is Google's keyword tool. You probably already use it to do your keyword research, but did you know it's a great indicator of when you should be marketing to your niche?

Search any keyword in Google's keyword tool, and the column on the far right displays a tiny bar graph which indicates the search volume for each term during each month of the year. A quick look at "wedding favors" tells us that most searches on this term occur from January until August.

Not surprising when you consider that most weddings take place in the late spring and summer. But this is just an at-a-glance version of the data.

For a more in-depth look at when your market is in a buying mood, take a look at <http://www.google.com/trends>. Enter your search term, and Google will present you with a graph detailing search volume for that term over the past several years. Not only can you see what months are hot, but you can also see if the searches are increasing, decreasing, or holding steady.

Not only will this give you ideas on when to begin your promotion, but you'll also know how much time and energy you should invest. After all, if searches on your term have fallen to nearly zero in the past several years, perhaps it's time to focus on another keyword.

Another valuable tool for finding trends is Twitter. If there's one place people gather to discuss the latest happenings in the world, it's on Twitter. You'll find people discussing everything from pop culture to breaking news, and by keeping a careful watch on what people are talking about, you'll begin to see patterns. To check trending topics, you can use Twitter's own search feature, or a site like <http://www.trendistic.com> which offers charts and graphs of any topic you choose.

Twitter is not the best choice for most markets, but if your business has anything to do with pop culture (movies, music, books, and television), politics, or news, then you can gain some valuable insights by paying attention to the trends there.

Finally, pay attention to the world in which you live. What ads relevant to your market are running on television? When do they start? How often do they run? What PPC ads do you see appearing on your competitor's sites or in the sidebar when you do a search on your keywords?

Simply opening your eyes and keeping track of what's going on around you will put you in a great position to emulate what works for other businesses in your niche.

Remember, though, that by the time you see an ad, on Twitter, or in a PPC campaign, it's likely too late for you to get started with a similar marketing plan. Instead, make a note of it in your marketing calendar, and you'll be perfectly situated to take advantage of it next year.

In seasonal marketing, advance planning is critical. We'll cover that in-depth in part two, when we develop your marketing calendar.

Christmas and Easter are Just the Beginning

What can you do when no holiday or special event really fits with your business? Make up your own holiday, of course! The only requirement is that it has something to do with your product or service.

For example, small-town florist Eden Florist and Gift Baskets once had a request for a "Get out of the doghouse" basket. Eden Florist took the idea and turned it into a marketing holiday – National Get Out of the Doghouse Day – that large providers like 1-800-FLOWERS call a success.

You might not sell flowers or gift baskets, but with a little creative thinking, you can surely come up with a holiday perfectly designed to showcase your products. If you're going to create your own holiday, though, keep in mind the timing of it. You don't want your little holiday to be overshadowed by a larger one.

Types of Marketing and How They Can Be Affected by Seasons

When we talk about marketing, we can mean anything that gets our message out to potential customers. The best definition I've ever heard was "Marketing is the act of telling people what you do, over and over and over again."

It's that simple. And that complicated.

For online businesses, marketing typically consists of one or more of the following:

- Content marketing through blogs or websites
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Search engine optimization
- Email
- Pay per click ads
- Free reports
- YouTube or other video hosting services
- Forum participation
- Blog commenting
- Ad swaps
- Banner advertising on other sites
- Guest posting

You can see that some of these marketing tasks lend themselves well to seasonal promotions, while others are more timeless in nature. If you use a blog as part of your overall marketing plan, for example, you're not likely to only blog during the holiday season. Doing so wouldn't give your blog very much traction in the marketplace.

But that doesn't mean that you can't change the focus of a particular marketing technique to match other seasonal promotions. You might consider a series of blog posts promoting a Christmas sale, or talking about other seasonal activities and how they relate to your readers' needs.

Let's take a look at some marketing methods and how you can use seasonal marketing to enhance those tools and techniques you use every day.

Content Marketing

As we said, content marketing generally refers to blogging, article marketing, video marketing, and other forms of content that you post throughout the Internet in an effort to gain links and bring visitors to your website.

The first step in coordinating your content marketing with your seasonal marketing plan is to keep an editorial calendar. This can be as simple as a desk calendar you jot notes in to an electronic calendar with reminders built in, but whatever method you choose, it's important that you maintain it and pay attention to it.

Planning ahead is critical for seasonal marketing, as we'll discuss more in part two, and it's just as important for your editorial calendar. Open up your favorite calendar application, find a pretty desk calendar that inspires you, or just print out a calendar template using Microsoft Word or your word processor of choice. This is going to be your editorial calendar.

Make sure you have at least a full year of calendar space, because like we said, it's essential that you plan ahead. It's also helpful if you have a calendar that comes with holidays and special events already filled in.

Now, begin filling in your editorial calendar on a monthly level. What topics or special events will you want to address for each month?

For example, if your business is selling gourmet chocolate, February is obviously going to be a big month for you. Make a note on your editorial calendar the dates you want to begin talking about Valentine's Day.

Remember, you need to plan ahead. Blogging about Valentine's Day on February 12 isn't going to do you a lot of good. You need to start early, so mark Valentine's Day on your calendar in December.

Search Engine Optimization

Something else to keep in mind when you're planning your editorial calendar is seasonal keywords. You'll need to research keywords specific to holidays, events, and other occasions within your niche. Again, Google's keyword tools and Google Trends are very helpful for determining when people begin searching for your chosen keywords, and can help you decide exactly where in your editorial calendar certain topics should appear.

Some seasonal keywords to watch for might include

- Holiday names
- Event titles
- Keyword modifiers like gift, present, shop, or buy

One thing to note when doing keyword research – especially if you're using Google's keyword tool – is that the monthly search volume is an average across the last 12 months. If your chosen search term only shows 100 searches per month you might be inclined to dismiss it as having little value. However, if that term is only searched on during a single month of the year, it actually has a much higher number than that – in this case it really gets 1,200 searches per month. They're just all in one single month.

Free Reports

Holidays and other events that tie into your seasonal marketing plans are great times to release free reports to help and inform your customers and attract new ones. You can offer a free report as an incentive to subscribe to a mailing list, or you can post it for free download on a number of distribution sites. You can even make it available – though not for free – on the Kindle platform.

For holiday marketing, a free report might be as simple as a compilation of your grandmother's favorite Christmas recipes, or a listing of the hottest kids toys of the season (with affiliate links, naturally). You might publish a decorating guide for those on a budget, or even a helpful report about getting through the holidays with difficult relatives. Virtually any type of business can lend itself to a free report about a holiday-themed topic.

Other seasonal topics that make good subjects for free reports include

- Wedding-planning checklists
- Home remodeling calendars (what to do when)
- Spring cleaning with environmentally friendly tools
- Summer vacation boredom chasing activities for kids
- Easy and inexpensive Halloween costumes
- Romantic getaways for Valentine's Day

All of these subjects (and literally dozens more) naturally tie themselves to specific times of the year, and can make your seasonal marketing efforts easier. Chances are you even have pre-existing content that can be reworked and repurposed to fit into different seasons. In fact, some topics – with just a few tweaks – can lend themselves to many different seasons.

Offline Marketing for Online Businesses

One area that's often overlooked for online businesses is the offline component, and the holidays are a perfect opportunity to step back into the real world.

Not long ago it was customary for businesses to send Christmas cards to their customers and suppliers. Now the cost of paper and postage has skyrocketed, while profits have dwindled, and little things like Christmas cards have gotten lost.

But why not resurrect this old favorite to your benefit?

Use a service like Send Out Cards to mail real cards to your most valued customers, vendors, and affiliates. The cost is minimal, and the return on your investment might just shock you. Not only will your customers appreciate the gesture, they'll be more likely to remember you in the future when they're in the market for services again.

If you're afraid of getting lost in the Christmas rush, there are lots of other occasions that warrant a nice card as well, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and – why not? – Even President's Day! Consider these special occasions that might be perfect for a card, gift certificate, or even a small gift:

- Customer's birthday
- Anniversary of her first purchase from you
- Anniversary of your business opening
- Your birthday (or your child's birthday, or your dog's birthday)
- Anniversary of your first server upgrade
- Google's birthday (where would we be without them?)

As you can see, sending a thoughtful card or small gift doesn't have to be serious business. Have fun with it. Your customers will appreciate it more, and be more likely to remember the occasion if you keep it lighthearted.

For online businesses like web designers or copywriters who cater to offline clients, keeping one foot in the "real" world is even more important. It's also easier to tie promotions in with seasonal activities.

For example, web designers might send out promotional postcards to local small businesses reminding them of an upcoming event. What better time to get a website all spruced up than when a big festival or tradeshow is coming to town?

By staying on top of local happenings, you can position your business to take advantage of many seasonal marketing opportunities your competition might miss.

No matter how you market your business, whether it's online or off, through ad swaps, pay per click, or with strictly free search engine optimization, you need to be aware of and in tune with annual events and happenings.

Everything from global events to tiny local parades can be tied to your marketing efforts, and every opportunity is a chance to make a fantastic impression on current and potential customers.

Part Two: Developing a Seasonal Marketing Plan

Your businesses marketing plan consists of more than just seasons. We've already talked about knowing your market and your niche, and how they interact with your products and services.

Get Out Your Calendar

Every business, no matter how small or how large, needs a marketing calendar. Much like an editorial calendar is your guide to content creation and distribution throughout the year, your marketing calendar is your guide to promotions not only through the year, but well into the future.

Start with a long-range view of your plan, from at least five years out. You don't have to know exactly how you'll be promoting your business in 2015, but you do have to keep an eye on trends from year to year, and plan accordingly. For example, you might find that your annual Fourth of July clearance sale has generated fewer sales each of the past three years. Pencil something different in for next year, then. Long-term planning makes it easy to spot the winners and losers in any seasonal campaign.

So grab a calendar and start by writing down all the holidays and other annual events you might want to focus on with your seasonal campaigns. Things like Christmas and Easter are easy targets, but don't forget the lesser-known events like local festivals, and things that don't occur annually, but are still important, like the World Cup or the World's Fair.

Next, consider your products. For some businesses, every product will lend itself to profitable marketing campaigns at Christmas, but for others, summer will be your biggest selling season.

Don't automatically dismiss a holiday just because you think it doesn't fit your market, though. Instead, you can look to other, related niches. For example, a site that sells flower bulbs will typically be pretty quiet around Christmas time, but a little creative thinking might lead you to add greenhouse kits to your store. There's no better gift for the gardener who has everything than her very own greenhouse, and with garden traffic already heading your way, you're in the perfect position to take advantage of holiday spending sprees.

Now, think about your promotion methods. Not every method will work with each season or event. Coupons, sale prices, and free shipping work well most any time of the year, but they're especially useful around Christmas time, since much of your competition will be offering similar promotions.

Some other methods to consider are

- Bonus offers (buy one get one free, for example)
- Gift Cards
- Discounts
- Press releases
- Giveaways
- Affiliate Contests
- Special events like teleseminars

Looking at your calendar, decide which promotional methods will work best for each holiday or event you're targeting. Remember, your campaign not only has to fit well with the season, it has to work with your product. Gift certificates aren't a good fit with eBooks about Internet marketing, for example, but they might be perfect for direct sellers of candles or cosmetics.

It's Not Always About the Price

While price is certainly one of the four Ps of marketing, it's not the only one. Just because you're having a holiday promotion (another P) doesn't mean you have to lower the price. You can offer added services instead, like a free gift with purchase. Or offer free shipping, or free gift wrapping.

For high-end items, consider offering personal shopping services to help choose the perfect gift from your selection. Personalization such as engraving or monogramming an item is another popular choice for expensive gifts. These are all added benefits that cost you little but add a great deal of value for your customer.

Another idea is to offer a preview of new products to special, VIP customers.

If you have a limited quantity item for sale – say the hot new video game this season – and you want to guarantee lots of sales, simply send out advance notice to your "special" customers. The combination of feeling important and product scarcity will practically ensure a sell-out, even at full price.

Timing Is Everything

The purpose of a marketing calendar – aside from the obvious notion that it helps you see what's coming up – is to make sure you get started with plenty of time to build your promotions. As we said earlier, if you start promoting Valentine's Day sales on February 12, you're not going to have much success. Sure, you'll grab a few last minute sales to people who are as unprepared as you, but you'll suffer in comparison to your well-prepared competition.

The key to planning any seasonal marketing campaign is building a backwards timeline. Start at the end of your campaign, and count the days backward for each leg of your promotion.

Say you're going to distribute a free report to your customers, build a special page on your blog for discounted items, and do some promoting via your blog and through article marketing. Assuming your promotion will end on Christmas Day (or whatever holiday your campaign surrounds), subtract the number of days it will take to write and format the report, the number of days it will take you to build any extra pages on your blog, the number of days you expect to spend writing and distributing articles and blog posts, and you've arrived at the day you need to begin your marketing efforts.

Of course, things rarely go exactly as planned, so make sure you add a few days for unseen issues like website downtime, kids getting sick, and other minor catastrophes.

In general, the bigger the promotion you're planning, the earlier you need to start. August is not too soon to begin thinking about Christmas!

However, it is too soon to begin promoting Christmas. You know how irritated you get the first time you walk into Wal-Mart and hear Christmas music playing? Think how annoyed your customers will be if you start hanging virtual tinsel in the middle of summer.

So while planning ahead is the key to getting it all done, you still need to keep in mind the accepted timeline for actual promotions. It's still best to wait until after Halloween to don the Santa hat.

Hitch a Ride on the Holiday News Cycle

If you really want to get the most bang for your seasonal marketing buck, learn to use the holiday news cycle to propel your campaign forward.

Think about some of the evergreen topics that show up year after year around national holidays. Weight loss and Christmas go hand in hand, so if your business is dieting, you have a ready-made press release. Sadly, fire safety is also a big topic around Christmas. Sellers of home safety equipment would do well to take advantage of the added press. January and February are filled with news from Hollywood as the Academy Awards take center stage, so if movies are your livelihood; this is the time to promote.

If you're using press releases, tying your news to nationally publicized events is a good way to gain more exposure. But even if you're not, it's easy to see that your customers will be influenced by what's going on around them and what they see and hear on the news. Now is the time to put your business in front of them as well.

Part Three: Getting the Message Out

Now that you've decided what holidays and events you'll be targeting and which products or services you'll be offering, it's time to consider how you'll get the message out to your customers, potential customers, and the general public.

As with all marketing campaigns, there are a number of methods to choose from, some of which we've already discussed in part one, and many of which you probably already do on a consistent basis.

But there are lots of great ideas for promoting your holiday or seasonal sales that, because they're not seen everywhere all the time, make your seasonal marketing campaigns even more memorable.

Contests

Contests are a fantastic way to get your customers to participate in your business and in your marketing plan, and seasonal campaigns offer a perfect tie-in.

Contests can be as simple as filling out a form or survey to be entered into a drawing, or as complicated as asking customers to record a short video testimonial for you to upload to your site. Some ideas for fun holiday-themed contests include

- Submit a picture of your pet dressed up for Halloween – perfect for a pet supplies store or costume shop.
- Write the greatest Best Man toast – ideal for a business dealing in anything wedding related

- Record a funny/cute/sentimental "commercial" for Christmas explaining why your web hosting company is the best – obviously best for a hosting company Christmas campaign
- Submit your favorite low-calorie [name your holiday] treat – perfect for a weight-loss program

Of course, no contest is complete without valuable prizes, so be sure to provide a nice incentive to entice your customers to participate. Things like free hosting, special discounts, or even just a mention in your weekly newsletter are often incentive enough, especially if your contest is fun and creative.

JV with Other Entrepreneurs

Sometimes, three heads – or businesses – really are better than one. And conducting business online makes it easy to collaborate with your peers for better seasonal marketing opportunities.

Earlier we talked about markets and niches, and how the market you are in may have many niches you don't cater to. By partnering with other business owners who do cater to those niches, you can build a powerful marketing campaign that benefits everyone.

For example, if your market is pet owners and your niche is puppy training, you might consider collaborating with businesses that sell dog treats, toys, and clothes. Your seasonal campaign might promote special packages containing a sampling of each businesses core products. Since each business will be promoting the campaign, it's a perfect opportunity for everyone to gain exposure to new customers without endangering their own client base.

Get Your Affiliates to Do the Work

If you're lucky enough to have affiliates, now is the time to put them to work!

First, make sure they have all the tools they need to do a stellar job. Things like content to use on their sites and in their newsletters, banner ads they can post on their websites, and rebrandable reports are all useful tools.

But for a little added incentive, consider hosting an affiliate contest to go with your seasonal marketing campaign. Some popular gifts for top-producing affiliates include

- iPads
- Netbooks
- Hotel vouchers
- Amazon gift certificates

If the thought of spending hundreds of dollars on pricey gadgets makes you turn a little green around the gills, don't worry. There's another option.

Commissions

Rather than buying them an expensive gift, let them buy their own with the extra commissions they'll earn during your seasonal marketing campaign. For digital product sellers, changing your commission structure from 50% to 60% or even 75% won't even be felt after all those added sales start coming in. And your affiliates will be much more likely to promote your products if they know there's an added payout coming their way.

There is one thing you should do, though, if you're going to ask your affiliates to promote your products more vigorously than normal. Launch something new. After all, it's hard for an affiliate to put extra emphasis on the same old stuff he or she has been promoting all along.

Add a new eBook to the line-up – or update an old one. Repackage several older items into a new bundle. Or for sellers of physical goods, add a new product line to the mix, a new candle scent, or a new size, color, or style. Anything that is out of the ordinary and gives your affiliates a reason to contact their list with your promotion is almost always a sure hit.

Don't forget – if you're launching a new line or product to go with your seasonal promotion, you'll need to build that time into your marketing calendar. There's nothing worse than not having the product ready when launch day rolls around – especially if all the marketing material is already out there!

Offline Marketing Tools

Speaking of marketing materials, don't dismiss actual printed material. Just because your business is "online" doesn't mean your customers won't appreciate a tangible reminder of you.

We touched on this earlier when we talked about staying in touch with offline businesses during their busy seasons, but the technique can work for those of us who are strictly online as well.

Christmas cards, small branded calendars, even CDs or DVDs make fantastic marketing pieces you can use to keep your brand in front of your customers.

Since this method is understandably more expensive than simple online promotions, it's a good idea to reserve it for the truly special clients.

Write a Book

It's been pretty well established that writing a book is a good way to instantly brand yourself as an expert in your field. You can take advantage of this fact by launching your book to coincide with your seasonal promotions.

Publishing a book is easy with print on demand services like Lulu.com and Amazon's Create Space. In fact, it's no more difficult (or expensive) than penning an eBook. All you have to do is write your book – or have it ghost-written for you – format it as required by your publishing platform, and upload it to their server. They do the rest.

In the case of Amazon, your book will even appear on their site for sale alongside other published works, so you'll have the power of Amazon's marketing machine behind you.

But best of all, you'll be able to tie your book to your seasonal marketing campaigns. Some ideas for books that would work well with seasonal marketing include

- Cookbooks with family recipes
- Decorating ideas for the holidays
- Scrapbooking templates
- Quilting/knitting/needlepoint pattern or instruction books
- Honeymoon destination tour guide

Again, make sure you build enough time into your marketing calendar to accommodate not only the time it will take you to write a book, but any additional time to get your new title approved by and listed on Amazon, Lulu, or other bookseller.

Press Releases

Press releases are a marketing tool you can use any time of the year, not just for seasonal promotions. However, as we briefly touched on earlier, tagging along with the seasonal news cycle can make your release even more beneficial.

The key to an effective press release is that it has to be news. If your release is all promotion and no news, you won't get much exposure. Consider how your business can stand apart from the crowd by doing something newsworthy. For example, you might donate a portion of sales in October to breast cancer research, or launch a new line of products just in time for Christmas.

You might even write a book. Now that's certainly worthy of a press release, isn't it?

Product Reviews

No matter how terrific your product is, if no one knows about it, you won't make any sales. One way to get the word out about your products is to ask for reviews on popular websites in your market.

Many times, the offer of a free product in exchange for a review is enough to entice a blogger or website owner to try it out and write a review. But sometimes – especially in highly competitive niches – you might be asked to compensate the reviewer.

Do what you're comfortable doing, but do keep in mind the FTC requires paid reviews (even those paid with free products) to disclose the fact that money changed hands. Make sure when extending offers for review products that you choose sites who demonstrate their compliance with these guidelines.

Have Fun with Apps

Who hasn't "Elfed Themselves" in the last few years? Office Max's wildly popular web application might be a stretch for the pocketbooks of many small retailers, but that doesn't mean you can't do something equally fun and creative.

Games and fun apps are a fantastic marketing tool that even the smallest business can use. Simple Facebook applications like quizzes are inexpensive to create and often go viral, bringing you hundreds of potential new customers for a minimal investment. iPhone apps are much more expensive to create, but can also be a source of revenue if offered for sale. Even a small web application you can host on your site has the potential to bring in new customers.

Last-Minute Checklist

With all the planning and promotion you've been doing, it's easy to forget to check the little things that can go wrong with a marketing campaign. Some things to double-check include

- Links – check for incorrect links and 404 errors
- Coupon codes – make sure you're not accidentally giving away the farm
- Test your cart settings so you don't charge shipping where you said you wouldn't, or charge an incorrect price
- Make sure your host can handle an upsurge in traffic
- Check any autoresponder series for current information
- Test contact forms for function
- Test help-desk software

If possible, ask friends and colleagues to test your site for problems. Remember, the best tester is someone completely unfamiliar with your business model and the software you're using. They're the best people to check for usability issues others might miss.

After the Party

So you've had a wildly successful seasonal promotion. Congratulations! Now, like after any holiday party, you're stuck dealing with leftovers; product that didn't sell, web pages that make little sense out of the context of the holiday, and the inevitable returns and support calls.

Luckily, cleaning up online is even easier than running the dishwasher. Since there will still be links all over the Internet that point to your site's special promotion pages, it's probably not a good idea to just take them down – although you can if you choose. A better option is to simply tweak them a bit.

Start by removing them from your navigation menu. It's one thing for someone to come across your Christmas sale page by clicking a link from an article directory, but it's quite another to have "Holiday Specials" in your navigation bar.

If someone does happen upon a sale page, you want to make sure they can't actually buy anything. Replace any live links, or simply replace product listings with a placeholder message asking that the visitor return again next Christmas.

As for any leftover merchandise, after Christmas sales are as traditional as Black Friday, so plan a clearance sale or other promotion to help clear out the old stock. The same goes for any returns.

Start Small

For decades, seasonal marketing has been used exclusively by the big players; huge retailers with multi-million-dollar budgets and advertising teams who worked all year to come up with a single holiday promotion.

But there's no reason your small, online business can't benefit from seasonal promotions as well.

Don't get caught up trying to do everything at once. Instead, start small. Plan one single campaign this year. Next year you can expand and build on what worked for you, and add other promotions as well.

Study not only what worked for you, but pay attention to what your competition does to raise awareness of her brand during holidays and seasonal events. Chances are, if they're putting money into a promotion, it's because it works for them.

Don't Get Carried Away

How many seasonal campaigns are too many? Well, there's a certain furniture retailer I know that seems to have a sale for every single holiday and event on the calendar. Everything from President's Day to Grandparent's Day is fair game, it seems.

While you might think that this is a good strategy when it comes to drumming up business, you may find the opposite is true. If all you do is run special promotions, you might find your customers don't buy when there's not something special happening. In other words, your seasonal prices will become the norm.

When it comes to seasonal marketing, pick three or four big campaigns, and leave the rest alone. That doesn't mean you can't talk about it, but don't go overboard. Your customers will thank you.

Which ones to choose?

For retailers, the obvious first choice is Christmas. Frankly, if you skip this one you'll just look unprofessional. For service providers and sellers of digital goods though, it's easy to get lost in the crowded Christmas arena. Better to spend your time and energy where you'll more likely be noticed – in the off season.

In the end, it will come down to testing what does and does not work in your market and your niche. So pick one or two campaigns you can get excited about, plan them out carefully, and see what happens. You don't have to spend a ton of money or time to test the results. Like all things online, seasonal marketing can be inexpensive and simple to try out, so don't be afraid to bomb. Just pick yourself up and try again with a different tactic.

Track Your Results

As we said, not every strategy – or holiday – will work for every online business. Some entrepreneurs do extremely well with blogging and article marketing. Others swear by pay per click advertising. Still others would be lost without their affiliates. But in order to find out what works in your business, you need to keep track of your results. Don't just throw a plan together and hope for the best.

Instead, keep detailed notes about every aspect of your plan. Who did you talk to? Where did your ad run? How many postcards did you mail? And most importantly, how much traffic did you generate?

There are several ways to keep track of the results of any given campaign. The simplest is installing a software such as Google Analytics on your site, which will help you learn where your traffic comes from, what pages of your site they visit, and where they go when they leave.

Other options include putting coupon codes, special landing pages, and even special telephone numbers. For offline materials, the easiest way to track how many sales you make through a direct mail effort is to include a coupon, gift certificate, or discount code. For online efforts, setting up a special landing page on your site for each campaign or ad placement makes it easy to count visitors and conversions.

Regardless of how you do it, the important thing is to have some sort of tracking and measuring in place to help you decide if the effort you put in this year is worth doing again next year, and how you can improve your conversions next time.

While in the past, seasonal marketing has been the exclusive domain of large retailers with even larger budgets, more and more small online businesses are starting to see the advantages of using seasonal marketing techniques to grow their business and increase profits.

Remember, seasonal marketing isn't always about Christmas. It can encompass any recurring theme or event related to your business, even if that relationship isn't always clear. Many online businesses have had great success by taking advantage of lesser known holidays and events, or even by making up their own, so don't limit yourself and your promotions to the same old ideas everyone else is using.

When developing your seasonal marketing plan, keep in mind all the holidays, special events, and other cultural occurrences we discussed throughout this eBook. Remember to include local happenings as well as global in your brainstorming sessions, and you'll certainly find a few suitable events to include in your seasonal marketing calendar.

Keep in mind that less is more when it comes to promotions, as your customers will quickly grow tired of constant sale pitches for this or that special event, and as with any form of marketing, test your results and tweak as needed to improve your efforts.

But most of all, have fun with your chosen strategies, because the last thing you want to do is to just make more work for yourself without any pleasure in the process. If you don't look forward to your new seasonal marketing plan, you'll only come to resent it, and that will show in everything you do.

To Your Success,