

*Unwrapping
Holiday Success:*
The 2023 Playbook
for Effective
Holiday Marketing



'Tis the Season *to Shop*

The yearly holiday season is right around the corner, and while consumers are making family plans and preparing lists for gift-giving, forward-thinking marketers are developing strategies for the busiest shopping season of the year.

Marketers, it's time to gear up for the holiday season. This special time of year offers a unique and bustling commerce atmosphere for brands to capture the attention and hearts of consumers. As marketers are well aware, the holiday shopping season starts earlier and earlier each year.

To drive revenue and engagement, brands need to make the right moves in terms of

strategies and techniques, which means they need the most applicable insights necessary to successfully navigate and succeed in holiday marketing this year. Regardless of whether you're a small business owner looking to maximize sales during the holiday rush or a seasoned marketer aiming to revamp your holiday campaigns, having the knowledge and tools necessary to stand out from the competition will help you create a lasting impact on your target audience and win the season.

Last year, Marigold's Strategic Services team studied retail brands to see what worked best when it came to engaging customers through holiday campaigns. Read on to learn what really jingled consumers' bells.



The *Holiday Email* Experiment

20 BRANDS

During the 2022 holiday season, Marigold tracked 20 retail brands for 61 days. This study was conducted by subscribing and sending emails from these brands to a single inbox, imitating the life of an average customer during the holidays.

2,000 COMMUNICATIONS

With all mail being sent to a group inbox, each piece of mail was opened and reviewed but without clicks or transactions. We collected nearly 2,000 communications from early November until the end of the year, tagging each email for various attributes, features and content.

30 VARIABLES

By considering more than 30 variables, the result is a robust view into the interactions a customer has with a brand around the crucial periods of pre- and post-peak week.

Key Findings

We chose a statistical model to run this study because of its ability to correct outliers, allow for uncertainty in the calculation, and logically smooth over the findings.

Our key findings were as follows:

1

More emails do not equal increased engagement.

2

Fewer than 8 words in subject lines increase open rates.

3

The vast majority of campaigns were deployed between 8 a.m. – 12 p.m.

4

Percentage-off was the most popular discount that brands mentioned in their emails.

5

Price was mentioned in 50% of the email campaigns deployed.

6

Brands were creative with utilizing animation and interactive elements.

7

23% of emails included a mobile-related promotion.

8

Store locators existed in almost 70% of the emails analyzed.

9

Free shipping mentioned in the subject line can increase the engagement rate by 62%.

10

Emails that included gift cards within the email body had a 48% uplift in click rate.



Benefits of Black Friday Same-Day Sends

When done right, Black Friday same-day sends can be a game-changer for brands wanting to make the most of this high-impact shopping occasion.

Before the big day, consumers eagerly anticipate the best deals and promotions, so sending timely and compelling emails can successfully capture their attention and help drive immediate action. Additionally, for the rush-hour feel that fringes around Black Friday and Cyber Monday — these fast-paced, single-day shopping occasions — same-day sends allow brands to communicate real-time offers, flash sales and limited-time discounts, creating a sense of urgency and excitement for customers.

Our findings suggest that up to two same-day sends can increase engagement, but anything more than two emails on the same day can negatively impact engagement performance. If brands are offering short, single-day sales, they could benefit by scheduling two same-day sends to drive engagement and revenue, but be sure to cap your sends at two emails.

UP TO 2

same-day sends can
increase engagement

2+

same-day sends can
decrease engagement





Holiday Email Marketing

Send Medians

Email marketing during the holidays provides an opportunity to connect with customers when they are actively seeking gift ideas, special offers and promotions.

We found that the daily communication and email sends peaked during Black Friday and Cyber Monday. And during the week before Christmas, email sends peaked again with customers receiving more than one email per day.



6
EMAILS

was the maximum number a brand sent on a single day

1
EMAIL

was sent by brands on average

2
EMAILS

was the average sent by brands during peak days



BE MERRY & PRESS SEND

Holiday-Themed Emails

Many consumers love the immersive experience of the holiday season. For customers, holiday-themed emails help evoke a sense of excitement, nostalgia and sentimentality. Themed emails remind them of their own special traditions, while helping them create emotional connections with their favorite brands.

According to our research, retailers begin sending themed emails in early October. Black Friday-specific themed campaigns peaked in the first week of November, and Thanksgiving campaigns followed the same trend as Black Friday, with some brands deploying campaigns using Thanksgiving content and themes in early October.

By providing a delightful and personalized shopping experience during this special time of year, brands can tap into their customers' holiday spirit, while taking full advantage of the creativity the season offers. Themed designs that include heartwarming visuals and festive colors provide consumers with an engaging experience that encourages them to take advantage of the offers presented.

55%

of brands chose to incorporate a holiday-themed creative in conjunction with their regular theme

20%

of marketers deployed campaigns with creatives dedicated to the holiday season

18%

of brands deployed email campaigns with holiday-specific themes during Black Friday and Cyber Monday

Timing Is Key During the Busiest Shopping Season

Timing is key when it comes to making an impact with holiday marketing.

Keep in mind that during this lively and convivial, albeit busy and somewhat stressful time of year, consumers are already being bombarded with a multitude of campaigns, advertisements and promotional messaging from dozens, if not hundreds, of other brands, all fighting for space in the inbox. So, the timing of holiday emails holds significant importance in winning the attention of consumers and maximizing the success of marketing campaigns. Understanding the preferences and behaviors of your target audience, segmenting email lists, and leveraging

data-driven insights can help optimize the timing of holiday emails.

In our study, we found that a majority of email sends occurred between 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. While morning seemed to be the most popular time for sending campaigns, the early evening was the second most preferred time, with approximately 25% of brands choosing to send emails between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. Not surprisingly, the time frame between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m. showed the fewest sends, with fewer than 10% of emails being sent between 8 p.m. and 12 a.m., and only a tiny fraction of brands (fewer than 5%) choosing the time frame between 12 a.m. and 4 a.m.

THE PREFERRED EMAIL SEND TIMES OF BRANDS



The majority of sends occurred between 8 a.m. – 12 p.m.



Approximately 25% of brands chose to send emails between 4 p.m. – 8 p.m.



Fewer than 10% of emails were sent between 8 p.m. – 12 a.m.



Only 5% of brands chose to send emails between 12 a.m. – 4 a.m.

By strategically timing holiday emails, marketers can better ensure that their messages land in the inbox when consumers are most receptive, which will allow them to maximize their visibility and drive engagement that results in conversions. That means that sending emails when recipients likely have more time to browse, read and act upon them, like in the early morning or evening, can lead to higher open rates and click-through rates.

ALL I WANT FOR THE HOLIDAYS IS TO Master Subject Lines

When it comes to finding a place to stand out in a crowded inbox, a compelling subject line is undoubtedly the first and most critical point of contact to entice consumers into opening the email. Like any other time of the year, subject lines can make or break the success of email campaigns. Marketers would do well to remember that during this time of year, consumers are receiving a high-volume influx of messaging in their inboxes, all of which are persuading them to take action in various ways. So, how can your subject line stand out?

We found that the following adage about subject lines remains true and consistent throughout the different shopping seasons of the year, including the holidays:
Less is always more!

In our review of all the email messages we collected, we noticed that the average length of subject lines was approximately eight words long. While subject lines of an average length such as this seem to perform well, the length of a subject line can also negatively impact the performance of the open rate. Keeping subject lines short, concise and mobile-friendly is also crucial since many recipients check their email on smartphones.

15%

of emails had a subject line consisting of exactly 8 words

13%

of emails had a subject line that was 7 words long

10%

of emails had a subject line with fewer than 5.5 words



ALL I WANT FOR THE HOLIDAYS IS TO Master Subject Lines *(con't)*

Because the holiday season is one of the most competitive times for the market, subject lines that arouse a sense of urgency and curiosity tend to perform exceptionally well.

While exclamation marks and money-off offers do not increase open rates, deep discounts do. Including deep discounts, specific types of discounts, coupons and offer codes, and free delivery were tactics that performed the best for brands. Incorporating holiday-oriented phrases such as "exclusive holiday deal" or "last chance to save" may also

work to get the attention of recipients and embolden them to take immediate action.

To get the best performance out of your subject lines this upcoming season, personalization will be a key driving factor, such as addressing recipients by their names or tailoring subject lines based on past purchases. A/B testing your subject lines on segmented audiences and analyzing that data to understand which subject lines perform best will also help optimize your campaigns and ensure that your messages stand out among the rest of the holiday email mania.

80%

.....

of emails sent included promotional content and a specific type of discount

40%

.....

of emails included a free delivery as a promotional method and did not require a minimum spend

25%

.....

of brands deployed email campaigns that included coupons or offer codes





SPREADING HOLIDAY CHEER WITH
Irresistible Promotions

Including holiday promotions in email marketing is a powerful strategy that can help significantly boost sales and consumer engagement. As the holiday season approaches, consumers actively seek the best deals and offers — making email a prime medium to start interacting with them.

During the holiday season, retailers follow different strategies to drive engagement and conversion rates. The majority of mail from brands in our study included promotional messages in the body of the email rather than the subject line, but 40% of the subject lines included a percent-off promotion in the copy, and price was mentioned in more than 15% of subject lines.

We also noticed that promotions appeared more frequently within the email body and had deeper discounts than the discounts that were included in subject lines. A percent-off was the most popular discount that brands chose as an incentive to get consumers to take action, but the depth of the promotion within the emails didn't increase the CTR.

By crafting engaging and visually appealing emails that advertise promotions like exclusive discounts and limited-time offers, and by strategically timing these promotions, brands can create a sense of excitement and urgency that drives action from consumers.

80%

of emails included percent-off as the primary discount type

50%

of emails mentioned the price of products

25%

of emails mentioned the monetary value after the discount

Content for *Holiday Marketing*

Crafting holiday email content creates a prime opportunity for brands to both spread joy and drive revenue.

Holiday-themed content allows marketers to tap into the spirit of the holidays and resonate with customers on a personal level. Even though promotions and discounts were the majority of the content we received from early November until the end of the year, some brands also incorporated different elements in their campaigns.

16%

of emails included
flash sales

8%

of emails sent
BOGO offers

67%

of emails included a
store locator

22%

of messages included
a gift card

13%

of mailings with a
shipping-related purchase
had a deadline



Including extras like a gift card or mailing with a shipping-related deadline shows consumers that brands understand the need for a quick solution, especially like a last-minute gift idea, which is an effective strategy to convert customers almost immediately by creating a sense of urgency.

Including practical material for customers such as instructions or store locators proved to be another effective strategy to drive in-store traffic and accommodate customers. While fewer than 3% of emails offered a free gift for customers or mentioned in-store events, brands included these other elements in their campaigns, which could enable a spike in engagement, purchases and in-store traffic.

JINGLE ALL THE WAY

Holiday Marketing for the *Mobile Era*



Mobile usage in marketing has reshaped the way brands connect with their target audience.

The ever-increasing adoption of smartphones, tablets and other mobile devices allows consumers to now carry the power of digital commerce in their back pockets. For brands, this shift has transformed holiday marketing strategies, making mobile optimization a priority. Mobile-responsive websites, apps, and mobile-friendly email campaigns are not only essential tools but also necessary ones to provide a seamlessly enjoyable customer experience.

We are a mobile-centric society and brands need to adapt their strategies to meet consumers on the small screen. Over the festive season, 24% of all

the emails we studied included mobile mentions and incentives such as app-specific promotions or SMS offers.

Now is as good a time as ever to start optimizing your campaigns for mobile. Offering unique opportunities for location-based targeting, real-time engagement and personalized content, campaigns that include mobile push notifications, SMS marketing, and in-app promotions provide an innovative and personalized way to engage customers in a timely fashion. By embracing mobile marketing, brands not only expand their reach and boost engagement, but they are also ready to stay ahead of the competition while building deeper connections with their customers and progressing toward long-term success.

52%

of mobile content included the mention of short codes such as SMS opt-in and -out

36%

of the emails contained an incentive for app downloads or in-app purchases

12%

of the emails included both mobile content (SMS) and app-related incentives

Elevating Email Engagement with

ANIMATED HOLIDAY DELIGHTS

Incorporating animations into holiday marketing creates dynamic and innovative messaging that can captivate customers and enhance the impact of your campaigns.

Brands now have the ability to add excitement and creativity to otherwise static messaging by incorporating animated elements such as GIFs, cinemagraphs, or interactive visuals.

Done correctly, animations can expertly draw attention to specific offers, products or calls-to-action as well as assist in communicating complex ideas in an engaging and visually appealing manner. They are undoubtedly a powerful tool that can boost open rates, increase click-through rates and leave a fun and positive impression on your readers, which will hopefully lead to higher engagement and increased conversions.

During the 2022 holiday season, a number of brands used animation to capture readers' attention and improve engagement rates. According to our study, approximately 23% of emails included some type of animation.

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ANIMATION BRANDS USED IN THEIR EMAILS INCLUDED:



ANIMATED
main images &
backgrounds



ANIMATED
backgrounds



ANIMATED
characters



ANIMATED
text & highlights

Although incorporating animations into your messaging can create a real attention-grabber, using animations judiciously is critical. Overly complicated, large or excessive animations are guaranteed to slow down loading times and impact customer experiences negatively. It's important to test and optimize animated emails for various devices as well as through the most popular email clients.



Free Shipping and *Preferred Shopping*

In addition to great promotions and offers, many emails also included two treats to motivate customers toward action. Brands offered free shipping without a minimum amount on the purchase, and during holiday frenzy sales, they didn't restrict customers' preferred method of shopping and how they could use discounts and promotions — whether in-store or online.

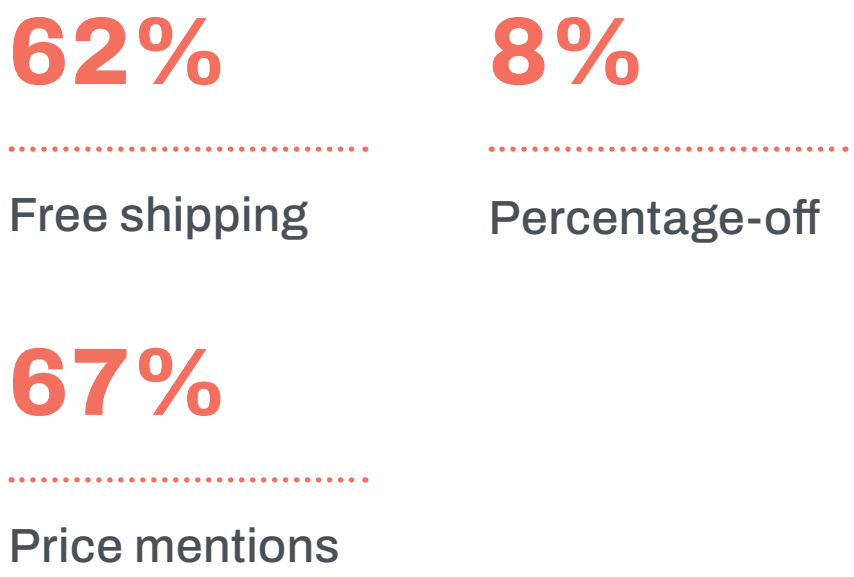
Only 6% restricted customers on their preferred shopping method, making the purchase either online or an in-store exclusive. From this 6%, there was a 98% online-only discount restriction and a 2% in-store only discount restriction.

Brands are capitalizing on the powerful offer of free shipping to convert as many customers as possible. In addition to tempting offers and discounts, 70% of the emails also included free shipping in the email body. From that 70%, 45% had a minimum purchase amount, but the remaining included free shipping with no minimum purchase amount required. And interestingly, free shipping appeared in the subject lines of only 2% of all emails.

What Engaged Customers *the Most*

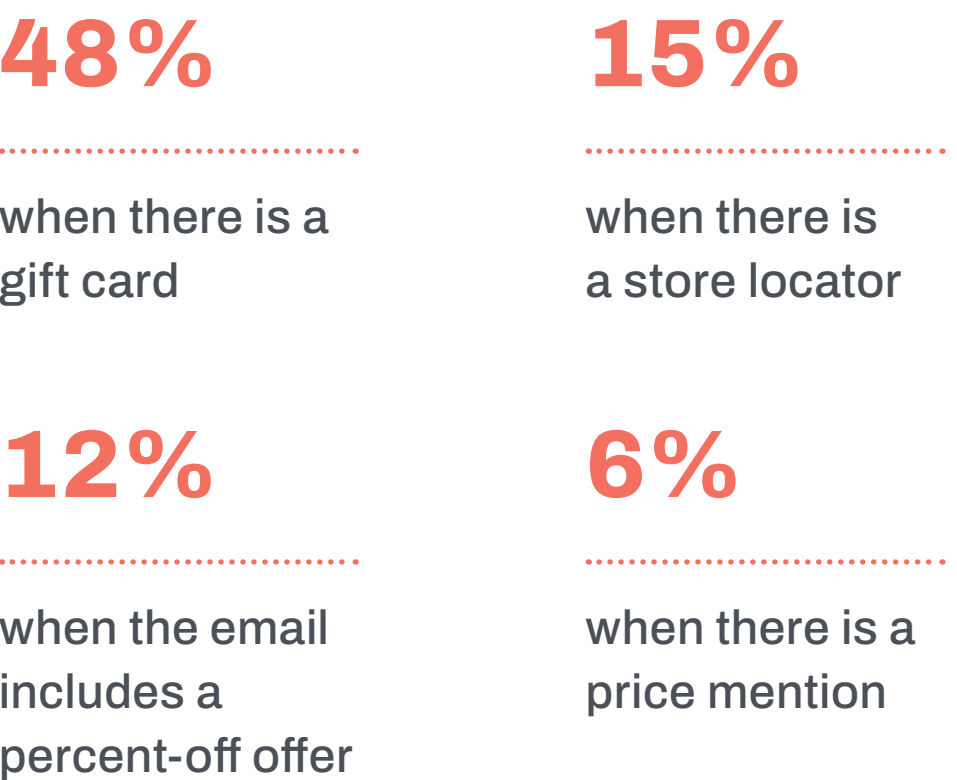
During periods of increased purchasing activity, some brands were sending up to six emails per day. The total click rate peaked the week before Thanksgiving and the week before New Year’s Eve. However, customers spent the least time engaging with messages during the third week of December.

While marketers did their best to increase opens during the holiday season, our findings suggest that they were successful at driving engagement and open rates by **including the following elements in their messaging:**



Specific elements within the email body can boost engagement as well, so don’t underestimate the power of initiatives such as including a store locator, gift card or price mention!

The expected increase in engagement is as follows:



Ensure Your *Holiday Marketing* Success

Last year's holiday marketing experiment left us with a number of valuable insights to help marketers create campaigns that convert. As the busiest shopping season of the year, the holiday season is an optimal opportunity to forge new connections with customers and continue to build your relationships with current customers.

While there are so many possibilities and different directions in which you could drive your efforts, we've compiled the top 10 recommendations to consider when strategizing for the season.

OUR TOP **10** RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE *2023 Holiday Season*

1. Keep subject lines short and concise — ideally no longer than 8 words.
2. Don't send more than two emails per day to customers. It can harm your engagement rate.
3. Customers love animation and visually engaging templates. Ensure your content is displayed correctly regardless of the device.
4. Drive in-store traffic by adding store locators within your emails, which is also a great opportunity to promote BOPIS.
5. If you want to maximize the potential of your emails getting opened, include "Free Shipping" in the subject line.
6. Restricting the primary discount or sale to a particular channel is not advisable. Not many brands follow this practice!
7. Gift guides and editorial-styled content can help your indecisive customers. Make sure you incorporate some educational content in between the offer-heavy campaigns.
8. Customers were the least engaged during the third week of December.
9. A dynamic countdown can create a sense of urgency and result in a quicker conversion.
10. During Black Friday & the Holiday Season, the majority of the brands send promotional content. Personalization and a well-segmented audience can help you differentiate yourself from the competition.

Where *relationships* take root.

Marigold's approach to Relationship Marketing stands alone in a world of one-size-fits-all marketing technology companies. Our solutions are designed for your specific size, industry, and maturity, giving you the technology and expertise you need to grow the relationships that grow your business, from customer acquisition to engagement to loyalty. And, with a team of strategists that provide insights into what's working, what's not, and what's changing in your industry, you're able to maximize ROI every step of the way.

Great marketing isn't just about conversion, but true connection. Learn why 40,000 businesses around the world trust Marigold to be the firm foundation they need to help relationships take root.

Find out more at [MeetMarigold.com](https://www.meetmarigold.com)

The Marigold Strategic Services Team is here to serve your team with valuable insights and assistance with your marketing endeavors. Want to know more about how you can boost engagement, yield a higher ROI and close your holiday marketing season with total success? Reach out to our team to learn how we can help.



Rima Deming
PRINCIPAL MARKETING
STRATEGIST



Georgia Gkolfinopoulou
ASSOCIATE MARKETING
STRATEGIST



Yanling Meng
DIGITAL MARKETING
STRATEGIST

