AUDIENCEX

Guide to Turn Holiday Traffic Into

Record-Breaking Revenue

What Changed This Year



2025 holiday sales grew 4.1% from Nov 1 to Dec 31, on actual card-transaction data rather than survey estimates (CNBC/NRF Retail Monitor, Jan 2026). That is the base this guide plans against. **Five things changed** enough since the 2024 edition to rewrite the plan.

01

AI became a measurable channel, not an experiment.

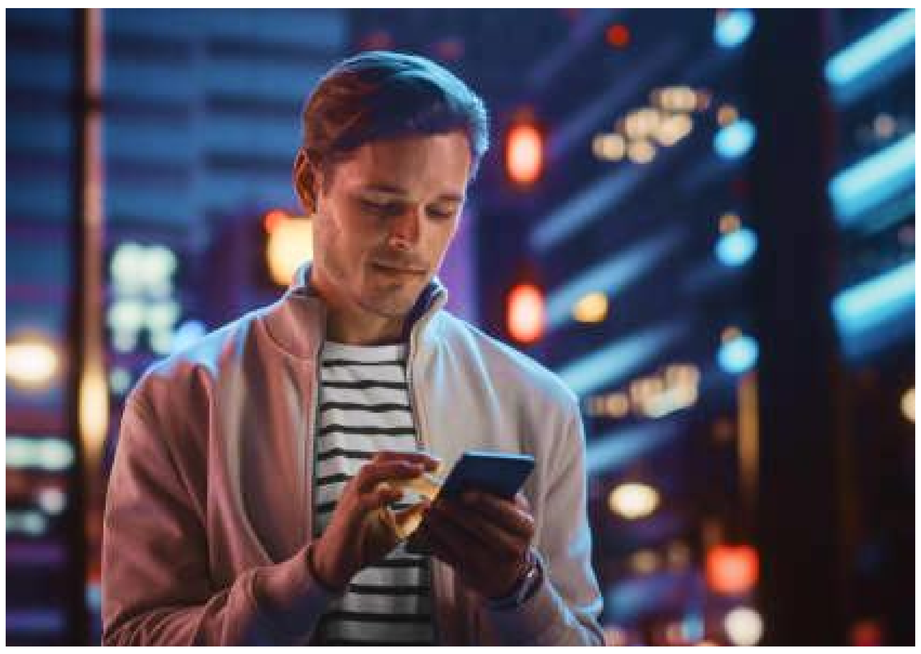
Traffic to retail sites from generative **AI tools rose 693.4% during the 2025 holiday season**, and those visits converted 31% better than every other source. This is no longer a pilot line item — it is a channel with a scoreboard (see Section 05).

02

In-chat checkout failed. Discovery didn’t.

OpenAI pulled back Instant Checkout in early 2026. Walmart measured checkout inside ChatGPT converting roughly 3x worse than a click-through to Walmart.com, even as ChatGPT drove about 2x the new-customer rate Walmart sees from search. The pattern that survived: discover in AI, buy on your own site.

What Changed This Year



03

The political cycle reshapes Q4 media pricing.

AdImpact projects the 2025–26 election cycle at $10.8 billion, the most expensive midterm on record. Election Day falls Nov 3 — three weeks before Thanksgiving, so the pricing crunch clears right as the season starts.



04

The calendar is longer this year, not shorter.

Twenty-nine days separate Thanksgiving and Christmas in 2026, two more than 2024. Less compression, more pacing — budgets spread across a longer stretch instead of concentrating into one week.

05

Value-seeking has hardened across income levels.

Deloitte finds brand and retailer switching, and promotion dependence, holding steady across income tiers — not just among budget-conscious shoppers. Four in ten Americans now show deal-driven, cost-conscious habits.



WHAT THE SEASON IS WORTH

$1.70–1.71T

Deloitte's 2026 holiday retail forecast, up 4–4.8% year over year. Online sales climb 7.5–8.4% to $316–319B.

Source: Deloitte, Nov 2026–Jan 2027 window, Sep 2026

+4.5%

Bain's 2026 growth forecast — in-store up 2.5%, nonstore up 9%. Nearly 70% of the season still happens in-store.

Source: Bain & Company, Sep 2026

What 2025 Told Us

Online spending reached $257.8 billion Nov 1–Dec 31, up 6.8% from $241.4B in 2024.

Mobile majority: Mobile drove more than 50% of online holiday sales for the first time, during the 2025 Christmas shopping season.



Cyber Monday: Cyber Monday reached $14.25 billion, up 7.1% year over year.

BNPL at scale: BNPL hit $20 billion, up 9.8%, with 82.2% of purchases on smartphones. Cyber Monday BNPL crossed $1 billion for the first time, at $1.03B.

A flatter season: 25 days closed above $4 billion in online spend, up from 18 in 2024 — the season is spreading out, not concentrating.



Trading up: Discount-driven demand pushed unit share of the priciest goods up 20% versus the rest of the year, and 56% within electronics.

The 2026 Calendar

Confirmed 2026 dates. Think about the promotions each will need, the budget behind them, and how far in advance each campaign has to be locked.

Month	Activities	
October	05 –11	Walmart Deals
	06 – 07	Amazon Prime Big Deal Days / Target Circle Deal Days
	31	Halloween (Saturday)
November	03	Midterm Election Day
	26	Thanksgiving
	27	Black Friday
	29	Sofa Sunday
	30	Cyber Monday
December	01	Giving Tuesday
	04 –12	Hanukkah (eve–end)
	14	Green Monday / Free Shipping Day
	19	Super Saturday
	24 – 25	Christmas Eve / Christmas Day
	26 – Jan 1	Kwanzaa

THREE THINGS TO KNOW

01 **29 days between Thanksgiving and Christmas.**

Two more than 2024. Less compression, but also less urgency — promotional cadence has to carry a longer stretch.

02 **Cyber Monday returns to November.**

A late Thanksgiving pushed Cyber Monday into December in 2025. Comparing 2026 December to 2025 December will show a false decline if this isn't flagged.

03 **Christmas falls on a Friday.**

Dec 26 opens a full weekend of returns, gift-card redemption, and self-gifting before the new year.

The Consumer: Value-Seeking at Scale

Value-seeking used to read as a low-income behavior. It isn't anymore. Deloitte, PwC and the University of Michigan all point to the same shift: shoppers across every income tier are switching brands, chasing promotions, and pulling back on discretionary spend.

01

Gift budgets are down, and kids change the math.

PwC projects average holiday gift spending of $708, down 2% year over year. Households with children expect to spend $875; those without, $635.

02

Confidence fell sharply.

The University of Michigan consumer confidence index dropped 18.5% year over year, from 60.7 in June 2025 to 49.5 in June 2026.

03

Millennials are pulling back hardest.

Millennial gift budgets are down 10% and travel budgets down 37% — the steepest retreat of any generation.

04

Switching is now normal, not distress behavior.

Deloitte finds value-seeking persists across income levels: brand and retailer switching, and promotion dependence, used to manage spending rather than signal hardship. Four in ten Americans now show deal-driven, cost-conscious habits (Deloitte 2026 Global Retail Outlook).



K-SHAPED SPENDING

Averages hide the split. Higher-income households are still trading up on electronics and travel, while lower-income households cut discretionary categories first — two different holidays happening under one national number. Audience strategy should follow the tier, not the average.

Zero-Click Optimization

In-chat checkout failed. Zero-click discovery didn’t. OpenAI pulled back Instant Checkout in early 2026 and moved it toward its Apps model. Walmart measured checkout inside ChatGPT converting roughly 3x worse than a click-through to Walmart.com — even as ChatGPT drove about 2x the new-customer rate Walmart sees from search (Walmart, via trade press — a single-retailer data point, directionally useful). The durable pattern: discover in AI, buy on your own site. Winning the click is a second-order problem — sometimes there is no click to win.

24%

Of consumers plan to start holiday shopping on AI platforms like Gemini, ChatGPT and Claude — up from 17% last year. An additional 13% plan to use a retailer’s own AI agent.

Source: Bain Consumer Lab Holiday Survey 2026 (n=1,105), Sep 2026

+31%

Higher conversion on AI referrals vs. every other traffic source, with revenue per visit up 254%. Conversions ran 54% higher on Thanksgiving and 38% higher on Black Friday.

Source: Adobe Digital Insights, Jan 2026

693.4%

Rise in traffic to retail sites from generative AI tools during the 2025 holiday season. On Cyber Monday, AI traffic rose 670%.

Source: Adobe Analytics, Jan 2026



Two vendor-reported figures worth flagging with their own methodology: Salesforce reported AI influenced 20% of US holiday retail sales in 2025 (Salesforce-reported; a different methodology than Adobe’s, not additive). Adobe attributed $262 billion in sales to agent-driven discovery and a 142% surge in agent-handled tasks; retailers running their own AI agents grew sales 7.2% on average (Adobe-reported, Adobe’s own attribution model).

Zero-Click Optimization



Watch, don’t build yet

Three emerging protocols govern how agents will discover and transact. None require action yet — track them, don’t build against them.

UCP — Universal Commerce Protocol

Google + Shopify. Announced at NRF, January 2026.

ACP — Agent Commerce Protocol

OpenAI + Stripe. Handles checkout execution.

AP2 — Agent Payments Protocol

Handed to the FIDO Alliance in April 2026 to be governed as an open standard.

The practical guidance

Three things worth doing now, independent of which protocol wins.

01 Structured product feeds

Clean, complete, machine-readable feeds are the raw material every agent reads from.

02 Clean specs and availability

Plain product naming and accurate in-stock data — agents cite what they can verify.

03 Review depth

Volume and recency of reviews shape whether an agent recommends a product at all.

The Zero-Click Scoreboard

Track these alongside — not inside — standard performance reporting.

- Found rate
- Share of voice
- Recommendation position
- Citation rate
- AI-referred conversion rate

The Q4 Media Market

THE POLITICAL CRUNCH

AdImpact projects the 2025–26 election cycle at $10.8 billion — the most expensive midterm on record, up more than 20% from 2022.

$10.8B

Total 2025–26 political cycle spend — the most expensive midterm on record.

Source: AdImpact, 2026

$5.28B

Broadcast — still the largest single component of cycle spend.

Source: AdImpact, 2026

$2.48B

CTV — roughly 24% of cycle spend and the fastest-growing media type.

Source: AdImpact, 2026



WHERE IT CONCENTRATES

California leads all states at roughly $1.1 billion, followed by Michigan, Georgia, North Carolina and Texas. Advertisers with heavy presence in those markets should expect elevated CPMs through Q3 and Q4. Programmatic guaranteed and PMP deals let brands lock pricing before the market tightens.

NOV 3

Election Day — three weeks before Thanksgiving. The pricing crunch clears just as the season starts.

The Q4 Media Market

Q4 GOT CHEAPER, NOT MORE EXPENSIVE

The assumption that holiday CPMs automatically inflate no longer holds on the large social platforms. In Q4 2025, pricing on the biggest channels actually eased as impressions and clicks surged.

–1%

Google Search CPC, Q4 2025

Tinuiti Digital Ads Benchmark, Q4 2025

–18%

YouTube CPM, Q4 2025

Tinuiti Digital Ads Benchmark, Q4 2025

–13%

Facebook CPM, Q4 2025

Tinuiti Digital Ads Benchmark, Q4 2025

+17%

Meta impressions YoY
fastest growth since Q3 2023

Tinuiti Digital Ads Benchmark, Q4 2025



Retail & Commerce Media

Retail media is now a full-funnel channel, not a bottom-funnel one. Off-site is where the growth is.

$72.97B

US retail media ad spend in 2026, up 20.3%

eMarketer, 2026

$17.05B

Off-site retail media spend, up 29.5%

eMarketer, 2026

+43.1%

Retail media CTV growth in 2026

eMarketer, 2026

THREE ACTIONS

01 **Shift budget off-site.**
Off-site retail media is growing faster than the endcap — treat it as an audience layer, not a placement.

02 **Fund retail media CTV first.**
It’s the fastest-growing line inside the fastest-growing channel.

03 **Report it as full-funnel.**
Stop measuring retail media as last-click. It now touches awareness through conversion.

TIMING

Oct–Nov: lock retail media CTV inventory before Cyber Week; off-site placements should be live by early October deal days.

CTV & Streaming

Streaming hit a record share of TV viewing in December 2025, and consolidation is changing who you buy from. Hulu folds into Disney+ in 2026; the Nexstar–Tegna merger creates one company owning 265 local stations.

+11.5%

CTV growth in 2026, vs. digital video +8.7% and flat linear

dentsu, May 2026

47.5%

Share of all US TV viewing streaming captured in December 2025 — a record

Nielsen, Dec 2025

Netflix, Prime Video and Disney+ don't accept political ads, which concentrates political pressure on the CTV supply that does — useful for where to buy in October.

THREE ACTIONS

01

Buy October early.

Political-averse platforms (Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+) absorb overflow demand from advertisers avoiding pressure elsewhere.

02

Track the consolidation.

Fewer, larger sellers change negotiating leverage — know who owns what before you renew.

03

Weight CTV over linear.

Linear is flat. CTV and digital video are where the growth — and the audience — actually is.



TIMING

Sep: confirm supply-path ownership before Q4 buys. Oct: expect the tightest pricing on political-averse CTV inventory.

Social & Creator

TikTok Shop is no longer a test budget line, and live commerce is now a meaningful share of it.

$23.41B

TikTok Shop US ecommerce sales in 2026, up 48% — bigger than Target, Costco, Best Buy or Kroger ecommerce

eMarketer, Jan 2026

$20.6B

US social creator revenue forecast in 2026, up 16.2%

eMarketer, 2026

10% → 14%

Live commerce's share of TikTok Shop US GMV, 2024 to 2025

eMarketer, 2025–26

BFCM 2025 logged more than 760,000 livestream sessions and 1.6 billion views. TikTok Shop US sales over the four days from Thanksgiving to Cyber Monday 2025 reportedly hit $500 million (trade-press reported, unconfirmed).

THREE ACTIONS

01

Fund affiliate over flat-fee.

Affiliate and performance-based creator deals align spend with results in a way flat-fee sponsorships don't — a structural argument, not one we're attaching an ROAS multiple to.

02

Build for live, not the occasional stream.

Live commerce's growing GMV share justifies a standing production plan.

03

Treat TikTok Shop as a retailer.

At this scale it belongs in the same planning conversation as Target or Best Buy, not the influencer budget line.

TIMING

Nov: Cyber Week live-commerce programming should be locked by early November.

Search & Shopping

Automation now runs most of retail search, and it’s the one channel political spend barely touches.

62% / 61%

Share of retailer Google Shopping spend and sales Performance Max drove in Q4 2025, at near-parity ROAS with standard Shopping

Tinuiti, Q4 2025

+16% / +17%

Google Shopping spend and click growth even as CPCs fell 1%

Tinuiti, Q4 2025

27%

Share of retail Meta spend running through Advantage+

Tinuiti, Q4 2025



01

Default to PMax.

Near-parity ROAS at this share of spend means the automation case is largely made.

02

Let Advantage+ take share deliberately.

27% and rising — decide how much control you’re trading away, rather than watching it happen.

03

Use search as the political hedge.

When CTV and broadcast tighten in October, search inventory and pricing barely move.

TIMING

Ongoing — this is the channel with the least seasonal pricing risk; no October lock required.

Creative That Performs in Q4

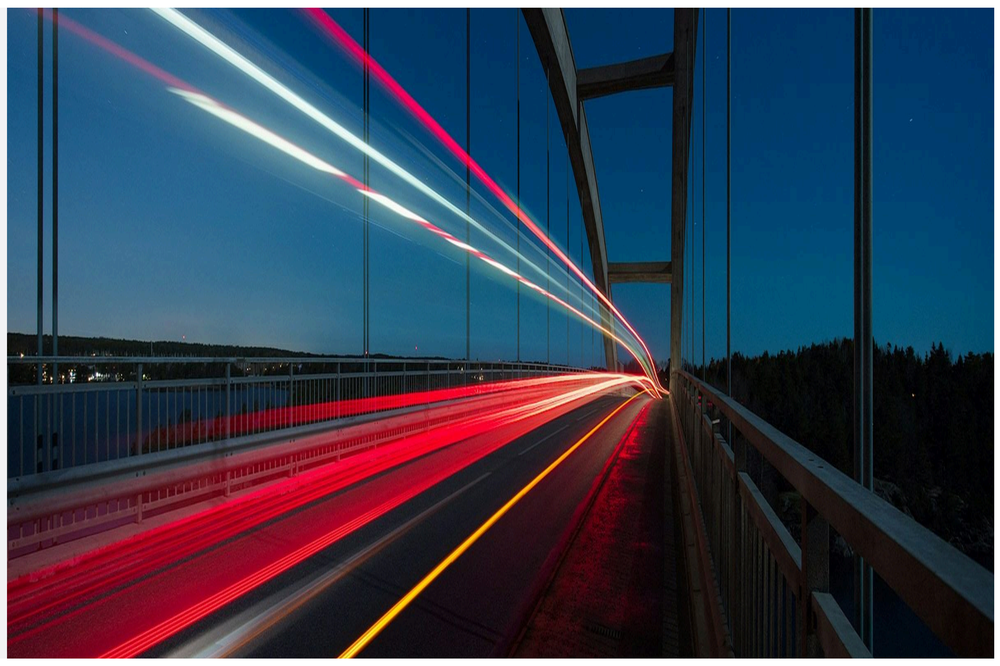
BEYOND THE DEMO

The immersive-shopping prediction from 2024 didn’t happen at scale. What replaced it is less flashy and more measurable.

01

Volume is now a performance input.

AI-assisted variant production turns creative output into a lever marketers can pull mid-flight, not a fixed asset list finalized in September.





02

Shoppable and interactive formats are mainstream, not experimental.

41.8% of US marketers already use interactive or shoppable formats across social and CTV (eMarketer/ Smartly, April 2025) — the direction is clear even before a 2026 refresh lands.

03

Creative now has to be quotable, not just clickable.

Clear specs, plain product naming and structured claims are what let an AI assistant cite a product accurately. Creative built for a human scroll and creative built to be quoted by an agent are increasingly the same job.



Measurement and Optimization

Why Q4 breaks attribution

Attribution breaks in Q4 specifically: decision windows compress, assist rates spike, and AI referrals under-report by nature. Three practices close the gap.

01

Incrementality testing.

Holdout tests separate real lift from spend that would have converted anyway — the only reliable read when assist rates spike.



02

MMM is back.

Marketing mix modeling fills the gap platform-level attribution can’t reach anymore, especially across a compressed, multi-week peak.

03

Closed-loop retail media measurement.

Retail media’s first-party purchase data closes a loop open-web attribution lost to signal loss — use it to validate the rest of the stack, not replace it.

Post-Christmas and Into 2027

THE WEEK AFTER

Christmas falls on a Friday this year, which makes Dec 26 – Jan 1 a full week bookended by two weekends. The season doesn't end on Dec 25 — it changes shape.

01 **Gift-card redemption is a second wave.**

Cards purchased in December get redeemed in the weeks after — treat late December and early January as a live selling window, not a wind-down.

02 **Returns are an acquisition moment, not just a cost center.**

Adobe tracked a returns increase in 2025. A smooth returns experience is a first impression for gift recipients who didn't choose the brand themselves.

03 **January self-gifting closes the season.**

Shoppers redeeming gift cards and rewarding themselves post-holiday extend the selling window into the new year.





THE FULL WEEK

Dec 26 – Jan 1 is bookended by two weekends this year. Extend promotional cadence through the full week rather than stopping at Dec 25.

Planning Checklist by Month

01

JULY – AUGUST

Lock CTV and broadcast rates ahead of political demand.

Political advertisers start absorbing premium inventory early — rates secured before Q3 protect Q4 budgets from a tightening market.

02

SEPTEMBER

Feeds, creative, and an AI-visibility audit.

Structured product feeds, clean specs and a baseline read on found rate and citation rate should be in place before the first deal day.

03

OCTOBER

Deal-days participation and early-shopper capture.

Walmart, Amazon and Target all run major promotions in the first two weeks of October — plan creative and budget for all three, not just Black Friday.

04

NOVEMBER

Political release and Cyber Week.

Election Day clears pricing pressure three weeks before Thanksgiving. Cyber Five spend should be fully live by Black Friday.

05

DECEMBER

Last-mile, shipping cutoffs and gift cards.

Standard shipping cutoffs land in mid-to-late December — shift budget toward gift cards and instant delivery as they pass.

06

JANUARY

Learnings and post-holiday re-engagement.

Gift-card redemption, returns and self-gifting extend the selling window — capture learnings while the season is still fresh.

How AUDIENCEX Helps

WHERE WE FIT

Everything above is strategy you can act on without us. This page is the exception — where AUDIENCEX product fits, if you want it.

01

AXi — audience intelligence.

AI-powered audience modeling and predictive analytics, built to translate this guide's data into targeting decisions specific to your customer base.

02

AX Studio — creative built for the volume this season needs.

AI-assisted variant production and shoppable, interactive formats, produced at the pace Q4 requires.

03

Omnichannel media access.

Direct access across retail media, CTV, social, search and DOOH — the full channel mix from Sections 06 and 07, bought and managed in one place.

04

Measurement that closes the loop.

Incrementality testing, MMM and closed-loop retail media measurement — the practices from Section 09, run for you.

If any of this would help your Q4 plan, the next page has the fastest way to reach us.

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Let’s Connect

At AUDIENCEX, we work to empower all of our clients with holistic, expert strategic development, seamless omnichannel media access, AI-enabled advanced data science, predictive performance, tech-driven creative, and more. If you’re looking to empower your Q4 campaigns and maximize your revenue, reach out to connect with a member of our expert team today. We would love to discuss your specific needs and goals, and explore how we can help you navigate this incredibly competitive season while setting your campaigns up for success in the year ahead.

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