Any holiday shopping season requires a long runway of strategic planning to fully prepare for the influx of customers who go online to shop for the holidays. This one is especially challenging considering the global pandemic that has flipped ecommerce on its head. To discuss how months of preparation will help retailers overcome challenges and provide satisfying shopping experiences throughout the holidays, Digital Commerce 360 spoke with Stephanie Heyward, director of advisory services at HCL Commerce.

What have been the most important lessons learned from recent holiday shopping seasons?

Retailers can’t start planning early enough. By June or July, they should be thinking about their merchandising efforts, building content catalogs and creating marketing content. They should ensure their online search relevancy is optimized, so customers aren’t frustrated if they can’t find what they’re looking for. And they should coordinate often with business teams. It’s not just about IT being able to handle the additional load; it’s also about how prepared the business is—especially around marketing.

Specifically, retailers need to understand the types of promotions and dynamic personalization the marketing team might be executing during this peak period to drive differences in behavior. Those differences can sometimes lead to unpredictable spikes. Retailers want to make sure they’re prepared to handle those spikes.

What role does COVID-19 play in retailers’ abilities to prepare for the shopping season?

The best practices don’t change, but certain things have become more important than ever. Merchandising and content are more critical than ever because customers can’t go as easily into stores to buy last-minute stocking stuffers or physically look at products. Product data needs to be rich and categorization, taxonomy and metadata need to be good. And, again, they need to have an effective search capability. Natural language processing (NLP), for example, can be highly valuable because it allows customers to be specific in their searches by entering phrases like “most popular girl toys for 8-10 years old.”

What practices can retailers put in place now to ensure a successful 2020 holiday shopping season?

Even if they don’t have a rich set of feature functions, the one capability all commerce solutions have—even home-grown ones—is the ability to modify the catalog content. Right now, enriching that data is something retailers should spend time on.

Search relevancy is incredibly important about conversions. Businesses can get a lot of bang for their buck by improving search relevancy. One way to do that is to look at their search analytics for searches that returned zero results. That is essentially the customer telling the retailer exactly what they want to buy and either that retailer doesn’t have it—or more likely, the customer couldn’t find it. And that’s just missed a conversion opportunity. When retailers improve search, they improve the customer experience. They may not have time to build out a new user interface before the holidays. But they can do that.

They should focus on load testing and stress testing to ensure the user experiences they do have run optimally and fast. As we all know, response time will impact the retailer’s conversion rate.

And most importantly, retailers need to make sure they have given themselves plenty of time for planning, coordinating and testing, so they aren’t introducing unnecessary risk.
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Build the customer journey you want on the cloud platform of your choice

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