

Prepare your e-commerce site for the Christmas shopping rush

By  Sven Hammar

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The Christmas shopping rush will soon be upon us and the only thing we can be certain of is that the online shopping of gifts will continue to increase. We can also be sure that many e-customers will be disappointed with their online shopping experiences.



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Response time is money, so here are my Top 10 tips for e-commerce success this Christmas:

1. Time is money

Even during periods with high traffic, the response time (i.e. the time it takes for a web page to load fully) should not exceed three seconds. E-shoppers are not the most patient bunch. If the site is slow, the customer will look for the desired product somewhere else: your competitors. A slow response means losing conversions, revenues and Google rankings. Analyse how your e-commerce platform performs compared to your competitors: is it faster or slower? How much money are you losing due to long response times and a corresponding weak conversion rate?

2. Optimise images and videos

High-resolution images and videos might make you think that your web site is modern and edgy, but they increase response times. So put vanity aside and reduce the number of high-resolution images and videos on your site - for the sake of revenue. If you still want the bulky images, then be sure to invest in systems that can handle short response times despite a high-resolution content. Use a CDN/accelerator service to speed up the delivery of rich content such as images and videos to customers.

- 3. Load test your site:** Perform load tests to verify the site's performance during various load levels. Measure performance during normal variations in traffic. Test the site frequently before, during and after peak season to ensure the availability of reliable information about the site's normal performance. Testing companies like my own (Apica) can load test web or mobile applications, simulate peak loads, and validate non-functional demands, such as maximum three-second response time for 90% of users during peak load (10,000 users per minute).

4. Damage control: test your peak load

Without tests it is almost impossible to foresee what will happen at peak loads, e.g. Christmas commerce. Components that function flawlessly at regular loads may all of a sudden become bottlenecks. A 'damage control' is a test that shows what it takes for the site to crash and how the course of events looks like. A damage control ensures that the web site comes up and running again - even at full load. A specialised supplier of testing services can give you advice on how to avoid getting stuck with sites that slow down or crash even if the traffic increases drastically.

5. Cache static content

Cache as much static content as possible in the browser. If the page content does not change, customers will not have to download it again from the network the next time they hit the page. This is a cost-effective way to speed up web traffic and gain performance improvements.

6. Use queuing techniques

Queueing techniques are commonplace in service industries like retail. And they can be used to manage customers in virtual stores as well. Only allow as many customers into your web store that it can safely accommodate (i.e. that it is tested for) and block all traffic above this number. If not, all users will get poor response times and the site might cease to function for all users. It is better to serve the customers who are already in the virtual store and let the others receive a polite error message or wait a little longer.

7. Be careful with third-party content

Sure, it is nice to be able to link Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Many e-traders do it and see it as something completely natural. But third-party material is seldom optimised. You lose control over part of your web site and take the risk of slowing it down.

8. Campaign sites

Create separate and simpler web sites that load more quickly for temporary campaigns, events and product launches.

9. Balance the loads

Check that load sharing is working properly. Load sharing distributes loads from different users onto underlying systems in an even way. However, sometimes there might be errors due to reconfigurations et al. Therefore one must verify that load sharing really functions properly and that the underlying servers receive an even load.

10. Use KPI to manage conversion

Finally, use existing analytical tools to identify which business processes your customers carry out on your web site, and optimise them for the best possible performance. With tools like Google Analytics it is possible to see where the visitors start and which routes they take on your web site. You can also see when the conversion rate is affected by slow response times. Back to my first advice: time is money and speed is always good - use KPI to manage your efforts for improved conversion and higher revenues.

ABOUT SVEN HAMMAR

Sven Hammar is co-founder and CEO of Apica, a provider of powerful, best-in-class technology for testing, monitoring, and optimizing the performance of cloud and mobile applications. He has decade-long experience and expertise in web performance and web optimization, e-commerce, cloud services, IT entrepreneurship and the Internet. He is also a

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