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The holiday shopping season is upon us, but with big retailers slashing prices and customers more price-savvy than ever, how can small retailers hope to compete? It's easier than you think—just try these 10 tips.

1. **Start now.** “Now is the time to begin executing your plan to reach customers during the holiday season,” says SBDC Business Advisor Monica Rayes. “Most of the challenges [small businesses face] can be alleviated with a well-thought out marketing plan that connects with consumers.”
2. **Use social media.** Today, Rayes says, customers expect to be one click away from businesses at all times. Use social media to get close to your customers, alert them about holiday news and specials in your business, and learn what they want and need.
3. **Use email.** Timing and subject line are key. “Time your emails right and make them stand out,” says Rayes. “Identify the best days and times for emails to go out, and be proactive about generating quick responses.”
4. **Use the Web.** Even if you don't sell products online, Internet marketing can expand your visibility to a wider audience. Use social media, search engine optimization and paid search advertising to attract customers seeking particular products.
5. **Enhance the shopping experience.** Price matters, yes, but emotion is still important for holiday shoppers, says Rayes. Use festive décor, music and scents to create a mood that makes customers linger (and spend more) in your store. Online, use images and marketing copy that put customers in a holiday mood.
6. **Be part of the community.** Participate in community events both before and during the holidays, Rayes advises. Get involved with charitable organizations and consider holding holiday events in your store.
7. **Capture early shoppers.** “Early shoppers like to plan ahead and take their time when making purchases,” says Rayes. Since these customers seek continuous engagement, Rayes suggests using mobile marketing, social networking and email marketing to promote customer loyalty programs, discounts and new product announcements.
8. **Capture last-minute shoppers.** The more you can simplify the gift-buying process for these shoppers, the better, says Rayes. Then, use email and social media to alert last-minute buyers of your simple, stress-free approach to shopping. “Offer ideas and recommendations, and provide a lenient return policy, free gift-wrapping or free delivery,” she adds.
9. **Offer added value.** Little extras mean a lot to harried consumers during the hectic shopping season. Offering holiday treats, free samples, gifts with purchase or free delivery are all great ways to reward customers and boost sales.
10. **Plan for Black Friday, Small Business Saturday (www.smallbusinessaturday.com) and Cyber Monday.** These key shopping days, which fall just after Thanksgiving, are vitally important for retailers. Have a plan for how you will market your business to attract customers on each day and how you will ensure adequate staff and inventory to meet the demand.

By Rieva Lesonsky

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