

# Holiday Shopping is Going to be Different This Year. Are You Ready?



Why Making Products Easier to Find  
is Critical for eCommerce Sites SEO in 2020

When has a recession ever been good for retailers? People tend to curb their spending due to worry about their jobs and paychecks. Even big spenders become suddenly reluctant to splurge on purchases that aren't essential or that are, arguably, downright luxuries.

But the recession of 2020, isn't a typical one. Sure, oil prices crashed early in the year—and then crashed even further. But all other factors aside, it's the swift and far-reaching spread of the COVID-19 pandemic that makes this recession unique. Extreme mandates to curb the spread of the virus have shuttered the doors of any retailer whose products and services aren't considered "essential."

Grocery stores are open, of course, as are many restaurants that offer drive through, drive up, or delivery service. But most retailers don't make the "essential" cut, despite lobbying to the contrary. And with "shelter in place" orders in effect for months, plenty of brick-and-mortar retailers are hard pressed to weather the storm—even with meager government stimulus checks.

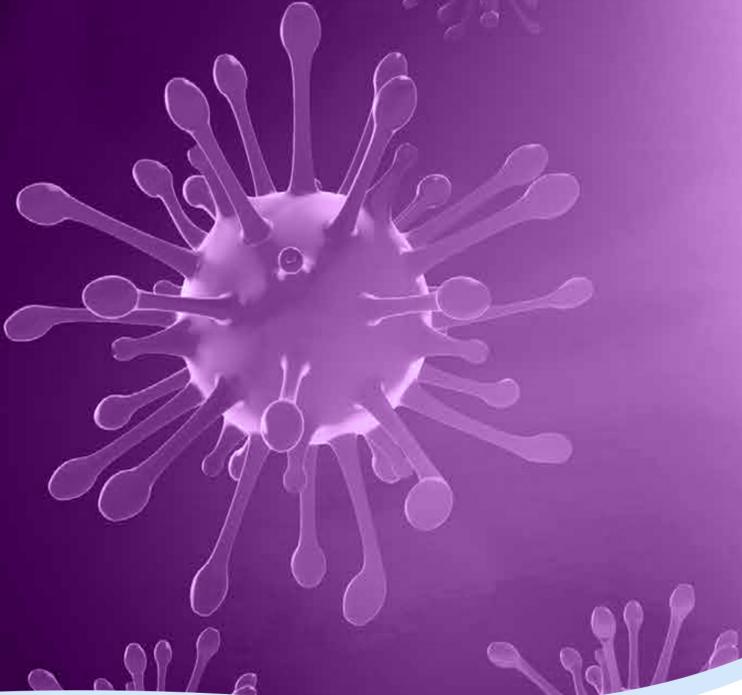
However, the holiday shopping season will be here before we know it, and retailers should prepare for a season that might make up for at least some of their 2020 woes—holiday shopping can account for up to 40% of annual sales<sup>1</sup>. For those that do hang on, the success or failure of this year's holiday season could be pivotal. Yet, with many health officials predicting a second wave of the pandemic later in the year, even the dependability of holiday sales seems in question.

This eBook explores how the 2020 pandemic has affected shopping habits and the effects, opportunities and challenges it poses for the upcoming holiday shopping season and beyond. Finally, it examines a few key strategies retailers can start applying today to meet those challenges, take advantage of the opportunities, and even make themselves immune to similar crises in the future.

After COVID-19, the success or failure of the 2020 holiday season could be a pivotal, make-or-break moment for many retailers.

Yet, with many health officials predicting a second wave of the pandemic later in the year, even the dependability of holiday sales seems in question.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/25/reuters-america-corrected-record-online-sales-give-u-s-holiday-shopping-season-a-boost-report.html>



**COVID-19 only hastened the move to “online everything”:**

- Social networks
- Work from home
- eRestaurants
- Distance learning
- Retail eCommerce

## Has COVID-19 changed retail shopping forever?

### The move to online everything

Besides the obvious health crisis, COVID-19 radically hastened business and consumer changes that were already taking place. The pandemic has forced a radical social change from in-person activities to online activities, simply because slowing the virus required a high degree of self-isolation.

- **Social networks:** Love them or hate them, people had already adopted social networks as places to keep up with friends, family, and other like-minded individuals. During COVID, social networks are often their only way to do so, save a phone or video call.
- **Work-from-home:** Office buildings across the country stood mostly empty as companies quickly enable work-from-home capabilities where, for many, none had before existed or been allowed.
- **eRestaurants:** Most restaurants found the only way to stay in business was to make their menus available for take-out and delivery, pushing diners to order online—or to cook for themselves.
- **Distance learning:** Even schools found that, yes, online education isn't just for colleges and universities.

### That included retail shopping, too.

Many consumers were already accustomed to buying consumer goods online from mega eCommerce sites like Amazon, Alibaba and MercadoLibre. And of course, there were plenty of smaller eCommerce sites for everything from clothes to cleaning and school supplies, garden equipment to major appliances, travel reservations and even cars. And while

digital buyers already comprised over 47% of shoppers worldwide<sup>2</sup> before the pandemic, even demographics reluctant to try online shopping found it necessary to hop on the bandwagon this year—at least for a while.

Reluctant or not, shoppers aren't likely to "go back" to how shopping was before the crisis, at least not completely. That means that if retail brands want to stay competitive, they must grow their eCommerce offerings, make products easy to find, and improve the overall online experience.

## How it will change the upcoming holiday shopping season

No one truly knows the long-term effects of COVID on our shopping behavior or how long those effects will last. But it's a sure bet that the "online everything" habit isn't one we will easily or quickly unlearn. Those who are digital natives are using eCommerce websites more than ever, while those reluctant or leery of online shopping before the crisis have discovered it isn't all that scary. Actually, besides the fact that COVID-19 made online shopping almost essential, it's downright convenient. Consumers won't easily forget that.

As we get closer to the holidays and the specter of a resurgence of COVID-19 looms, citizens will retain their caution, even if not mandated by government health officials. Gathering in large crowds for traditional Black Friday shopping in the malls and stores isn't likely what most people will be comfortable with, at least not for a while.

What shoppers *will* remember is how easy—or difficult—it was to find what they were looking to buy online, especially for the newer eCommerce adopters. After all, some eCommerce sites are more sophisticated than others. And some, especially those that contain thousands or tens of thousands of products, can make it super difficult to find what a shopper wants on the site itself, much less from an ordinary web search.

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Consumers won't easily forget that, even long after COVID and the recession are gone.



<sup>2</sup> <https://optinmonster.com/online-shopping-statistics/>

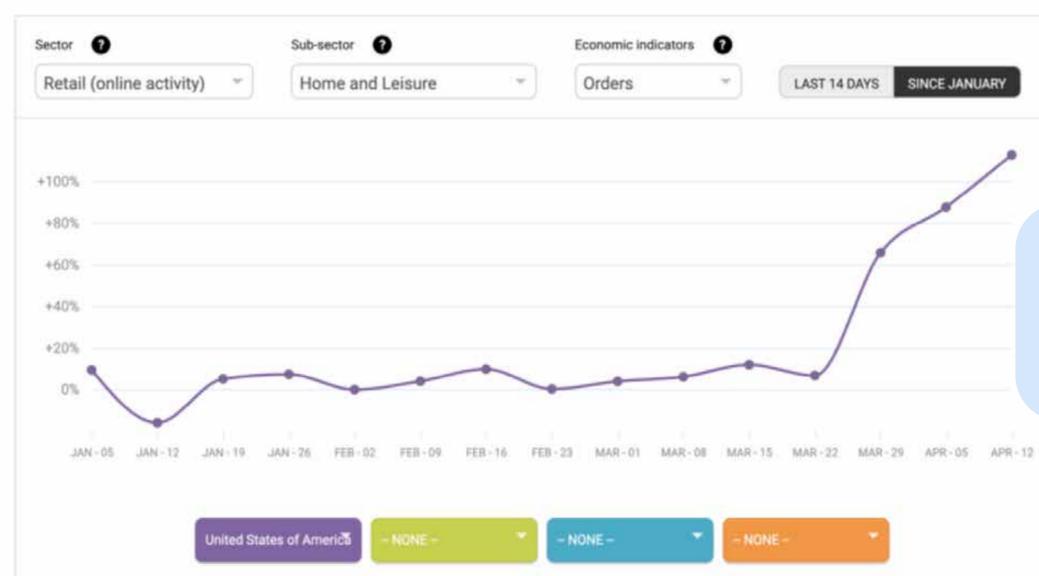
## The opportunities for eCommerce have never been better

What does this mean for how eCommerce businesses should be planning their holiday shopping season? Why is such preparation even more critical this year?

For one thing, the opportunity has never been greater. In 2019, eCommerce sales made up 14.6% of total retail sales<sup>3</sup>, and during the 2019 holiday season those sales grew almost 19% over the year before.<sup>4</sup>

Yes, it's true that along with the COVID-19 outbreak, an economic recession set in, but that hasn't dampened eCommerce at all. In fact, just the opposite. From mid-March to mid-April—while the pandemic became most serious in the United States—home and leisure brands online sales grew over 100%<sup>5</sup>. Not to mention the grocery and restaurant shift towards eCommerce which is already changing—or even reinventing—shopping for gourmet food-type gifts.

If eCommerce has been growing each year by leaps and bounds, and neither COVID-19 nor the recession have dampened that growth, how much more will eCommerce rise in 2020—especially if a resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall again limits or even closed shopping centers and malls?



View the regional trends interactive chart from [ccinsight.com](https://ccinsight.com)

3 <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/25/reuters-america-corrected-record-online-sales-give-u-s-holiday-shopping-season-a-boost-report.html>

4 <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/12/25/reuters-america-corrected-record-online-sales-give-u-s-holiday-shopping-season-a-boost-report.html>

5 <https://ccinsight.org/observations/home-leisure-retailers-may-be-benefiting-most-during-pandemic/>

## Key eCommerce strategy for 2020 (and beyond): Make your products easier to find.

Making your products easier to find doesn't just mean after a shopper lands on your website. They need to be able to find your products when a search occurs away from your site and uses a search engine. That means optimizing your eCommerce site's SEO to help holiday shoppers find exactly what they are searching for, faster and with the least friction. And you need to do it in an automated fashion, so you don't need an army of staff working round the clock to optimize pages every time you add or change an item.

Of course, there are many ways to spend marketing budget to make your products more "findable," but marketers don't often don't view SEO as the most important option available to them. However, in times such as a recession, budgets get trimmed. Not only are marketing organizations losing staff, but they're losing the spend for channels like SEM, email marketing and ads.

When the budget gets tied up elsewhere, it's a good opportunity to revisit SEO as a marketing channel, because it's something that you can do without spending any additional money.

Optimizing every product page can be daunting, especially for eCommerce sites with hundreds of thousands of items (and pages). But here are ways to do it in a smart fashion.

### 1. Perform a keyword gap analysis

Performing a keyword gap analysis is a critical first step in making your pages searchable. A keyword gap analysis showcases all the keywords that you're ranking for and how well you're ranking for each of them. It can also compare your rankings to those of your competitors' websites, so you can see your "gaps"—those keywords where you rank lower than your competitors—so you know which keywords to focus on in your on-page optimization efforts.

Keyword gap analysis is easy to do if you aren't an expert on SEO. There are numerous guides available online that can walk you through the process with very little effort, as well as a wide range of tools available to use.

Just be aware that it can take several months to perform a deep assessment, add all the content required to fill the gaps, take it all live, and have the search engines recognize it all.

**So, to benefit from this for the upcoming holiday shopping season, start now.**

## 2. Focus on the most relevant areas of your site first.

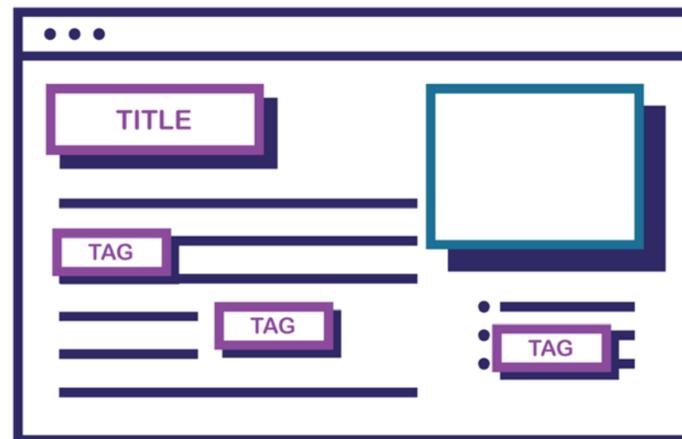
Start with those items/pages which are most relevant to your shoppers right now. Consider shoppers amid the COVID-19 outbreak and the accompanying recession. What retail items are relevant in conditions like these?

- Searches for high-fashion clothing might be down with people staying at home and watching their pocketbooks, but home exercise and workout apparel is in high demand.
- People are watching movies more at home and are looking for a better television.
- Or new cookware because they are cooking more at home.

Assess what your shoppers are most looking for *today* and focus your efforts for on-page optimizations like keywords, title tags, and meta description on those pages first.

## 3. Apply on-page optimizations to item category pages and specific item pages.

If the shopper is searching for “heavy duty cookware” or “workout singlets”, you likely have more than one of these in your store. That’s why you create category pages with lists of all items meeting this hot search term and filter controls to help shoppers narrow down the selections.



You’ll want to prioritize optimizing these category pages over categories that aren’t as relevant or “hot” at the moment. But you should also optimize the pages for each individual item in that category, especially if it is a brand and model that you know to be in high demand.

Simply put, know what’s “hot today” and make sure that shoppers can find it on your site using the search terms they want to use.

## 4. Audit your website architecture

If you have the resources and experts available on your team, you should audit your site architecture for technical flaws which can impact how accessible your content is to search engines. After all, if search engines can't find your content, they won't show in the search results.

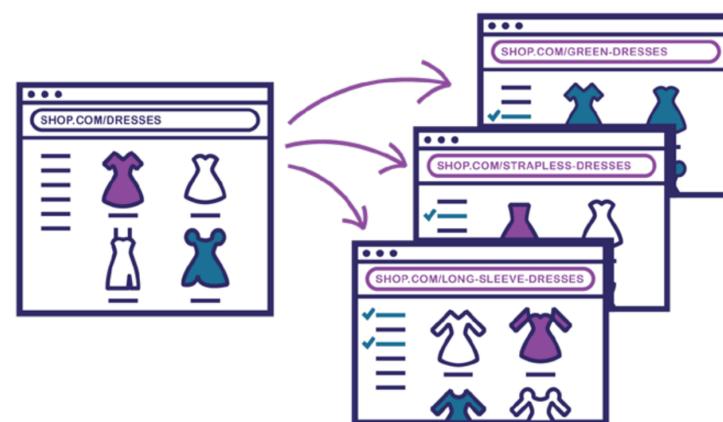
In addition, the deeper your page hierarchy—which often corresponds to the number of times a visitor has to click to arrive at a page—can reduce the importance, relevance, and authority the search engine assigns to a page. This can negate even the best on-page optimization.

A general rule of thumb is to keep all important pages as close to the home page as possible. While a “three-click rule” is not always possible on really large eCommerce sites, if you have important pages deep in your hierarchy, consider condensing those pages and relying on **faceted navigation technology** or filtering controls to allow users to get to those pages in fewer clicks.

## 5. Apply faceted navigation technology

One reason optimizing eCommerce sites for SEO is so difficult is that they contain thousands of unique pages accounting for each color, size, or any other attribute or combination customers use to filter the products displayed. Each of those pages has not only its own URL but its actual page of content. Even with only a handful of filters, the number of actual pages on the site becomes unwieldy, not only to manage but also to index by the search engines.

In contrast, faceted navigation technology—such as **Altezza's Hypercats**—can create a unique URL that customers see via the search engine results page that displays available products that match their query but which does not require a unique page that sits in the site's taxonomy page. This means neither a user—nor a bot—needs to drill down several layers to get to (or index) those pages. But once a customer clicks on one of the options on the faceted navigation page they are driven to the site.



## **6. Or engage a technology partner that can perform all these optimizations for you, automatically—across your whole eCommerce site.**

By leveraging the expertise, technology, and consulting of a world-class SEO partner, you can implement all the above SEO strategies, providing automated on-page SEO optimization for your entire eCommerce site. That way you can maximize search visibility no matter how many pages or products you have, so the right customers find you using the search term they want.

## **Get ready for the biggest jump in online holiday shopping ever**

To be sure, the COVID-19 crisis and ensuing recession have had a profound effect on society in many ways. From a commerce perspective, it has propelled what has been a slow but sure move to eCommerce becoming a more firmly engrained part of our everyday lives. Even though in-person shopping experiences will likely never die, online retail will remain the new norm.

Retailers' eCommerce sites are going to be in fierce competition for visibility. To gain that visibility, retailers must embrace new strategies and technologies to make their eCommerce site stand out to the search engines. Applying the strategies presented above will aid you in making sure customers find the products they seek on your eCommerce site.



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