3 tips to avoid being 'spooked' by holiday shopping

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By Carla Fitzgerald

For the nine percent of Americans (including me) who cite Halloween as their favorite holiday, seeing Christmas décor displayed right next to the skeletons, ghouls and witches in your local drugstore may feel like Halloween doesn't get the retail respect it deserves.

While an estimated 171 million Americans plan to celebrate Halloween this year, and total spending is expected to reach a record $8.4 billion, the fact is Halloween is now more than costumes and candy — it's the beginning of the holiday shopping season…and that can be *scary* if you're not prepared.

In this year's NRF Halloween survey, Allison Zeller highlights an interesting <u>trend</u>: millennial consumers (ages 18-34) are one of the top spenders on Halloween costumes, and the number of them who plan to attend Halloween parties is on the rise.

"In the era of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, there is no hiding a bad costume — and a clever costume makes for a buzzworthy addition to digital timelines," says Zeller. "Retailers can be a part of the action by helping consumers find everything they need to enjoy a seasonal party."

So how can retailers best follow Zeller's advice and ensure continued success well into (and beyond) the holiday shopping season? The answer: Mobile.

Mobile devices are pervasive, personal, and can be used to support marketing strategies both online and offline. Considering the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) estimates 91 percent of holiday shopping will take place at brick-and-mortar stores, the ability to use mobile insights to drive in-store sales is critical.

Below are three mobile strategies retailers should consider implementing this Halloween and throughout the holiday shopping season.

Entice customers with dynamic incentives

Coupons are great incentives, but they can be frustrating to a customer who tries to use coupons that have expired. And who hasn't experienced the annoyance of stocking up on a favorite product only to see it on sale a few days later?

You can alleviate these horrors for your customers using mobile. By combining location data with loyalty incentives, retailers can remind customers they have a coupon that is about to expire when a store is close by. Sending a helpful reminder via mobile will not only increase the likelihood of a sale, it also reminds customers of the value of participating in your loyalty program.

Create a seamless shopping experience

Delivering the right promotion to the right consumer at the exact right time is priceless, but it requires access to real-world context and historical customer data. The good news for retailers is this information can be acquired with the help of mobile.

For example, a customer researching Halloween costumes at home saves a superhero costume to their shopping cart, but doesn't purchase. Several days later, the same customer walks into a retail location where the same superhero costume is in stock. The customer receives a timely push notification to their smartphone, such as: "Find superhero costumes and accessories in aisle 8." The seamless delivery of relevant information at the right place and time successfully unites the online and in-store shopping experience, and improves the customer's overall interaction with the retailer.

Gather customer feedback

Beyond coupons and promotions, soliciting customer feedback is also exceptionally important to engender customer loyalty. Asking consumers to share feedback via smartphones not only helps improve customer relations, if can also create brand advocates if positive experiences are shared across multiple platforms, including social.

The best feedback is delivered when a purchasing experience is fresh in the consumer's mind. Sending your customer a prompt to write a Yelp review as soon as they leave the store increases the likelihood of the review getting written. It can also help the retailer immediately address and fix any issues. For positive feedback, brands can suggest users share photos of their merchandise across social channels with a special hashtag. Contests that use social tagging are an effective way to drive brand awareness, and the Halloween season is the perfect time to utilize contests. Retailers can run a costume contest on Instagram, rewarding winners with gift cards, loyalty points, or discounts on other holiday purchases. This strategy benefits the retailer in two ways — it creates social brand advocates and repeat customers.

All three of these mobile engagement strategies can help savvy retailers use the uptick in shopping around Halloween as an opportunity to cultivate brand loyalty with customers, fine-tune their promotional strategies, and eliminate the possibility of a spooky dip in sales during the holiday shopping season. The NRF forecasts sales in November and December to increase 3.6 percent to $655.8 billion, so marketing campaigns must be optimized now to ensure retailers fully capitalize on this holiday season.

By engaging with shoppers in a meaningful way via mobile, retailers won't purely benefit in terms of seasonal sales, but will grow the lifetime value of each customer.

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