



The ultimate eCommerce holiday planning guide



When you're expecting an increase in traffic, it's best to plan ahead to make sure your eCommerce site is ready to handle the surge of shoppers. This guide will help you prepare for all your new customers with tips for a stellar user experience and tricks for boosting performance.



First, the basics

While simple, these tips are incredibly beneficial for running a successful eCommerce site.

Now, when we say basics, we really mean basics. These are things that hopefully you've already got set in place, but may have slipped your mind at some point. Luckily, if you have forgotten any of these steps, they're usually pretty easy to fix.

Renew your hosting plan and domain name

When you're promoting your products this holiday season, the last thing you want to happen is for your website to go down. And one of the silliest ways that can happen is by forgetting to renew your hosting plan or domain name.

Before you space it off, open those accounts or check your inbox – when is it time to renew? Especially if you paid for a year of service during a holiday sale (looking at you, Black Friday shoppers), make sure you're set to renew before the expiration date hits, that way your own holiday traffic isn't impacted. Sure, it seems obvious, but it happens.

Update your site information

Even if you're not necessarily doing a big promotion for the holidays, other people might start driving lots of traffic towards your site. And if you are doing a major sale, you can guarantee an increase of new visitors to your site. So, make sure they can find the information they need.

Go through all of your products – are prices and descriptions correct? Are there any specs missing that people frequently ask about? And if you're doing a holiday promotion, does the discount code work? Try to test everything you can before the traffic hits, to ensure you've got a smooth checkout process. The better your user experience is, the more sales you can expect to make!

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And last, be sure to cover your bases with things like return policies and promotion details. During the holidays, you truly never know who will stumble onto your site, so try to foresee any unique cases you won't be able to help (such as foreign shoppers, if you only do domestic shipping). Better to be upfront with those policies than to let people down after they've added to their cart, or worse, put in their credit card information. That makes for a very unpleasant user experience, and could result in some negative PR.

Be prepared to run out of inventory

Along the lines of user experience, what happens on your site when you run out of an item? Will the site inventory reflect what's actually available or update estimated production times? This is information your potential customers would definitely like to know prior to purchasing.

STEP ONE

Make sure your site details update (or you manually update them) as things start disappearing from your inventory.

STEP TWO

Optimize your site so you don't lose any leads. For example, if an item runs out, instead of an "Add to cart" option, you could replace it with an email opt-in to let the user know when the item is back in stock. Then, even if they can't partake in the current sale, you can bring them back to the site in the future. Let's face it – people won't always remember to come back on their own, but if you send them an email, it's like a personal reminder in their inbox to check out your next round of products and get them back on the site.

Purchase an SSL certificate

Much like the hosting plan and domain name, hopefully you've already got this one squared away. But just in case you're spinning up a brand new eCommerce site, you'll want to install an SSL certificate. Secure Sockets Layer (SSL), is a protocol used to secure and encrypt communication between computers. In other words, it helps keep sensitive information on your site incredibly secure. This includes things like passwords, credit card information, banking credentials – basically all of the information your site stores that you (and your users) would want to remain safe. So as an eCommerce store, it's critical to have an SSL certificate installed on your site.



In the past, installing an SSL certificate was a bit of a juggling act. You'd have to buy it from a certificate authority, tell your hosting company about it, share information with both parties, and then it could be activated. That's not the worst system in the world, but it's not the smoothest, either.

So, here at Flywheel, we've decided to remove the hassle with our latest feature, Simple SSL. And the best part? It's completely free! With Simple SSL, we're offering free SSL certificates with all of our hosting packages. With a little help from our friends over at Let's Encrypt, there's no need to go back and forth with a third-party provider – you can get world-class hosting and encryption all under one roof!



Interested in a free SSL certificate?

The easiest way to add Let's Encrypt's free SSL certificates to your WordPress site is by signing up with Flywheel. If you're hosting your site with us, Simple SSL is available at zero cost to you and can be installed with just a few quick clicks.

[Learn more here!](#)

While these tips are pretty basic, they're all incredibly important for your eCommerce site to succeed. Now that we've covered the easy stuff, it's time to talk about performance – you know, how fast your site is actually functioning.





Achieve perfect performance

These three tips will help you optimize your site for blazing fast load times.

These days, if your site doesn't load within a couple seconds, many users will simply close the tab, never to return. When they come to your site, they want information now – not in several minutes. Plus, a site that loads slowly instantly loses credibility. Many users will start to wonder why, and instead of thinking of the technical difficulties behind managing an eCommerce site, they'll assume the worst, such as hackers or spammy advertisements.

So while there's no such thing as perfect performance, with a few simple tweaks to your site, you can get pretty dang close and drastically increase the amount of users that stick around to purchase your awesome products. Start with these tips!

Eliminate clunky plugins

I know what you're thinking: Plugins add functionality to your site, and functionality is good, right? Not always.

When you're browsing the WordPress Plugin Directory, it can be easy to get a little carried away and install every plugin under the sun, especially for eCommerce sites. While there are lots of great plugins that will help your sales flourish, there are some that can also bring performance issues with them and slow down your site.

Before you go installing things all willy-nilly, it's important to take a look at the plugin stats and information, and to ask yourself if you really need that plugin in the first place. Check when the plugin was last updated, if it works with the latest version of WordPress, and read through the documentation (if there is any). If it looks like a well-maintained plugin that accomplishes exactly what you need it to, it's probably a good option to install! If it's not a perfect solution, however, it's probably best to ignore that one and do a little more research.

“Plugins add functionality to your site, and functionality is good, right? Not always.”

So what about the plugins that are already on your site? There's actually a super easy way to tell which ones might be causing some performance losses – all you need is a plugin! (Yes, we see the irony in that, too.) It's called P3 Profiler, and it'll create a performance report for your site that gives you some insight into what percentage of load time each plugin is responsible for.



A good rule of thumb: Run a P3 Profiler test anytime you activate a new plugin. That'll help you discover any pesky plugins that are slowing down performance before you get too attached to them.

Optimize your images

Images are often some of the largest files on a page, meaning they can be responsible for some of the longest delays in load time. As an eCommerce site, you're naturally going to have a lot of images to display – not much you can do about that. But what you can do is optimize those images. By compressing the file sizes instead of just throwing any old picture on your site, you can drastically cut load time and keep things running fast.

The best part is that image optimization is actually pretty easy to do! All you need are the right tools. Basically, the goal is to get your final image to the size you actually need (not something too large) and at a quality that works well (not the absolute best, unless you really need that). To help, we recommend some tools like:

- [ImageOptim](#)
- [OptiPNG](#)
- [jpegtran](#)

A quick note: The tricky part is that even if you upload a well-compressed image, if your WordPress theme creates "duplicates" with different sizes (like smaller versions and thumbnails), those new images will not be compressed. (Inconvenient, we know.) So to help with that, we recommend [TinyPNG for WordPress](#) or [EWWW Image Optimizer Cloud](#).



Optimize your CSS and JavaScript

Like images, your CSS and JavaScript can actually slow your site down if they aren't optimized. The goal is to compress and minify your scripts as much as possible to cut down on load time and keep your site speedy. If your site has a custom theme, you'll definitely want to make sure the code behind it is close to flawless. But even if you're using a premade WordPress theme, you may want to look under the hood to see how clean everything looks (or ask a developer to, if code isn't one of your strengths.) First, let's start with CSS.

CSS

The most important thing to do with your CSS is to compress it and remove any unused selectors. It's all about trimming the excess and cutting down on the amount of code that has to run when the page loads. Getting a good development workflow is key, especially if you're using a pre-processor like Sass. To help with that, we recommend [Grunt](#), which is a JavaScript task runner that executes tasks for you while you develop. There's even a plugin for it called [grunt-contrib-sass](#) that simply compiles all your Sass files down into one, minifies it, and compresses it. Throw in the [grunt-contrib-watch](#) plugin on top of that, and it'll run the Sass task whenever you save a file. Easy peasy!

If you're not much of a developer, don't lose sleep if you're not using the latest and greatest CSS methodology. Just try to follow a standard while working with CSS to avoid any duplication or huge file sizes.

JAVASCRIPT

The golden rules of optimizing JavaScript are simple: Serve as few JavaScript files as possible, minify them, and concatenate. Ideally, you'd concatenate ALL JavaScript files into one and then minify the heck out of it, but sometimes that's not quite possible. For example, some plugins may have blocking JavaScript files. So, don't stress about this process being perfect – just try to get close.

And for those finicky files, you can always use the HTML attributes "async" and "defer" to load JavaScript files asynchronously or once the rest of the page is loaded.

Again, don't lose sleep over this if you're not quite ready to dive into the JavaScript behind your site. And no matter what your experience level is, always make change on a staging site so you don't accidentally bring the live site down!



Have a reliable hosting company

No matter what you do to your site to boost performance, there's another aspect that you need to consider – your hosting company. As traffic hits your website, it pulls requests from your servers. If they aren't equipped to handle the amount of people trying to load your site, it will seriously drop in load time or worse, completely crash. And that's the last thing you want while trying to run a holiday promotion.

While the price tag of shared hosting always makes it seem like a bargain, it comes at a different cost: slow site speed, irregular performance, and frequent downtime. The stress isn't worth it, especially when you have the ability to choose a managed WordPress host (like [Flywheel!](#)) that'll take care of a huge chunk of your WordPress performance woes.

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When it comes to hosting your eCommerce site, you don't want to mess with sub-par servers and unexpected downtime at the most important times. Can you imagine dealing with those issues in the middle of a Black Friday sale? It's just not worth it. With Flywheel, you can achieve world-class performance on every site and scale to millions of visitors.

[Learn more about how we'll keep your eCommerce site blazing fast here!](#)

These tips will help you boost performance on your site and keep it running blazing fast! But, if you're running an eCommerce site that gets a lot of traffic (like millions of visitors), sometimes you need some extra boosts. If you're expecting some record numbers of traffic, keep reading for our most advanced techniques!





High-traffic tips

If your site gets lots of traffic (like millions of visitors), these tips will keep it blazing fast!

If you've followed all of the tips up until this point, you've probably got a pretty speedy site already. But if you're looking for a few extra ways to ensure that's it's always blazing for your shoppers, try these tricks!

Use a Content Delivery Network

Let's say you've got customers all over the world that buy your products. If your site lives on a server in New York, and someone from Australia goes to pull it up, it'll take a smidge longer for the site to load simply because of the physical distance between the user and the server. That's where a Content Delivery Network (CDN) comes in to speed things up.

A CDN is a network of servers that serves up your site and its assets from different locations around the world based on where the user is located. The idea is that users will hit the server closest to them, cutting down the physical distance and in turn, load time. So, instead of waiting on a server halfway across the world, your users will be able to quickly load your site and buy your products!

To set up a CDN, some popular options include:

- [Amazon Web Services](#)
- [CloudFlare](#)
- [MaxCDN](#)

“Instead of waiting on a server halfway around the world, your users will be able to quickly load your site and buy your products!”

If your site is hosted on Flywheel, we've partnered with MaxCDN for a super easy CDN solution. Its worldwide network and advanced technologies mean that your content is always available and always performing at its best, no matter where you're at. [Learn more about it here!](#)



Cache everything you can

We're not exaggerating with that headline – taking advantage of caching on both the server-side and client-side can result in serious performance boosts. Basically, when a user loads your site for the first time, the browser can store (or cache) the contents of your site. This includes HTML files, CSS stylesheets, images, and any other assets your site may contain. That's beneficial because the next time that same user visits your site, the browser will be able to load the content without having to retrieve everything from the server again, keeping load time super fast!

Server-side caching is basically the same idea, but the cache takes place on the server level instead of the browser. This can save a lot of time loading content because the server doesn't have to use PHP to communicate to the database every time a page needs to load. This is where you really start to save time.

To set up server-side caching on your site, in true WordPress form, all it takes is a plugin: [W3 Total Cache](#). Of course, there are other plugins that would also work, but this is one of the most common options out there. Plugins like this will allow you to control server-side caching on your site, which will help you deliver content to your users super quickly.

ONE THING TO NOTE

While using plugins like this to improve server-side caching can be effective, they can take a lot of configuration and aren't the fastest server-side solution out there. Because WordPress plugins are PHP-based, it still takes time for the server to execute PHP-based caching code.

If you're hosted on Flywheel, you don't need to worry about caching plugins at all – we automatically take care of server-side caching for you using [Varnish](#). This means your site will be equipped with one of the fastest caching techniques available, and you don't even have to worry about setting any of it up! Plus, Flywheel servers are configured to automatically flush the cache anytime files change and anytime a post or page is updated. This way, you never have to worry about your users seeing outdated content.

When you set up caching for your eCommerce site, you just have to pay attention to your settings. Some pages (such as cart and checkout pages) need cookies to work – and those can't be cached. Because of this, some plugins (including WooCommerce) will automatically disable server-side caching. It's not always very apparent when plugins or themes disable caching, but you can always reach out to your hosting provider and ask them to force cache the site (minus those pages that need cookies).

And that leads us to our last point...



Work with your hosting company to ensure success

If you still have any questions, concerns, or just want a little advice, your hosting company should be able to help you out. Here at Flywheel, we love working with our customers to ensure their sites are prepped for their biggest sales to make sure everything stays online and running blazing fast! In fact, we have an entire team dedicated to working one-on-one with customers when these situations arise.

Every year during the holidays, people rush to the website of South Georgia Pecan Co. to purchase local Georgia nuts for holiday baking and gifts. They started prepping their website for the surge of holiday traffic in July, to ensure they had plenty of time to get everything prepared. We worked closely with the agency that created their website to ensure everything was up to date, fine-tuned their caching to allow optimal performance, and also ensured the site had plenty of resources and space on their hardware to handle the traffic spike.

This holiday season, we want your site to be successful, and we'd love to be a part of it. [Try Flywheel today to learn how we can help you scale your business.](#)



What is Flywheel?

Flywheel is a delightful platform that empowers designers, developers, and digital agencies to focus on what they do best — building beautiful, functional sites for their clients. We make it a breeze to create and develop WordPress sites, handle hosting, manage projects, and ultimately scale your business.

Stop wasting time on server management, security plugins, caching, and all those other boring repetitive tasks that take your focus away from growing your business and jeopardize your relationship with clients. Get Flywheel and get back to doing what you love.

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