

TOPICS & BRIEFINGS

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5 tips from abroad to give your Christmas figures a boost



As the UK economic climate makes it tough for businesses, it's not just retail brands and manufacturers who can benefit from the opportunities it brings: there are plenty of ways to maximise the uplift if you look further afield for inspiration.

So alongside our focus on **10 ways to make the most of Christmas**, we've looked at how businesses around the world make Christmas pay. Here are 5 best-practice tips from overseas to boost your business this December...

1. Lead times

With Christmas gifts starting to appear in the stores as early as September there's no doubt companies are stretching out the period to the max. But regardless of the size of company, any serious marketing activity around Christmas should be planned in advance. For brands putting special products and marketing in-store, the strategy will have been begun six months ago.

And for British companies wanting expert insight into how to stretch the Christmas period they should look to the US. There is even a chain called The Christmas Store which operates all year round selling decorations, tree ornaments and such like.

2. US techniques

Allyson Stewart-Allen, chief executive of transatlantic consultancy **International Marketing Partners** and author of *Working with Americans* says US companies make a big effort with Christmas-themed limited editions of products. "In American homes Christmas is a big deal," she says. "It's more than just a Christian event, it's a highly participatory event.

"American companies and manufacturers in the FMCG space do special Christmas editions of their products. So they may use red and green or silver in their packaging; biscuits in Christmas-themed shapes so there is much seasonality and seasonal assortments. So if your product lends itself to a Christmas version then that's what you ought to do and you can make a case that almost any product can be turned into a Christmas version," she adds.

But what about all those companies not operating within the retail environment – are there any tips British companies can learn from the US?

For B2B companies Stewart-Allen says Christmas touches are included in multiple ways: from making sure the franking machine says 'Merry Christmas' on all the mail going out to the use of Christmas cards. "It's seen as good business practice to send a card to your contacts and increasingly e-cards."



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In the UK cause related marketing (CRM) has become increasingly standard practice but in the US this is particularly prevalent at Christmas. As well as more companies donating the money they would have spent on Christmas cards to charity – something that's being adopted in the UK too – they make it possible for their staff to volunteer.

"They encourage their employees to help in the community like work a shift at the homeless shelter nearby or at their church and encourage American's to go out and do good works," explains Stewart-Allen.

But while it is common for many British companies to give their employees a gift at Christmas – which can vary from hampers, a Christmas bonus, a voucher etc – this is not done in the US for fear of upsetting employees of non-Christian faith.

3. Europe

Nick Fennell, director of [European Field Marketing Partners](#) points to Europe following very similar practices to the UK, especially in the retail environment where field marketing is concerned, he says there are some variations in rules and regulation that need to be adhered to such as sales promotion rules being stricter in Germany.

But one avenue Europe has – which is beginning to be adopted in the UK – is the tradition of Christmas markets. "In Europe the smaller players can gain from the Christmas market tradition. They are for smaller businesses and are very successful but it's no good just pitching up, you've got to have something that makes you the must-go-to destination; preferably not price but some kind of must-buy and merchandise it properly," he says.

He also points to Christmas being a time when staff should be used flexibly to make sure the most is achieved. This is probably even more important for SMEs than big companies.

"If you're selling mince pies you throw all your office staff into stores during the month leading up to Christmas. In Ireland [Glanbia](#) sells a lot of cream at Christmas and puts all its head office staff out, so they are probably only in the office one day a week and the rest they are in stores leading up to Christmas," he adds.

4. Digital marketing

Businesses of all sizes can use digital marketing to boost their Christmas activity but take care not to spam – it damages SEO and reputations – and think carefully about target audiences. [ONS](#) figures show that last year spend reached £42.1bn in December, £7.9bn of which was online. [Pinterest](#) can be a good part of the marketing mix and Katie Reynolds, analyst at [Greenlight](#) says photosharing on this social media is particularly popular among women (68% of Pinterest users are women aged 25 - 54 years old) with Christmas wishlists being compiled. She recommends businesses implement the 'pin-it' button as a social share option, ensuring all links are functional, branding your images and thinking about quality over quantity.

Greenlight's top tips for successful SEO at Christmas are: to make sure your website is optimised, especially for mobile search; use the same target pages every year rather than starting from scratch; plan an integrated social and SEO campaign for December and support with digital PR distribution; don't neglect Google Merchant Center and closely monitor competitors' activity.

Other Greenlight suggestions for increasing followers on social media in the lead up to Christmas are to create visually exciting content; engage with current followers and follow influential tweeters; allow social sharing on your website; participate in industry Twitter chats and don't buy followers as they are wasted stats when you actually run a campaign. On Twitter consider creating a hashtag for your Christmas marketing campaigns – it provides an easily identifiable visual and sparks curiosity as well as letting the brand easily track the reach of the campaign.

5. Networking

Charlie Lawson, national director of [Business Network International](#) (BNI), is a firm believer in the power of Christmas as an time to network, whether on a national or international scale.

"If only business owners enjoyed December as much as their staff. For many, it is a month of winding down, social gatherings and Christmas parties, but many see it as an interruption to business. But Christmas is the one time when you're probably more likely to meet people, go to social gatherings, attend more than one Christmas party and visit extended family – this is networking in its purest form. The most successful gurus in business networking, such as [Dr Ivan Misner](#), argue that people will only refer business to

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NatWest like you. This implies building a rapport beforehand which is hard to do if you're about your company and its products or services. Don't be shy to tell a personal story, it will only get you remembered and hopefully liked," he says.

And he adds to remember to keep loads of business cards on you all the time.

The key to a successful December is to see the opportunities for your business, and set aside some thinking and actioning time early in the month to enact measures that will boost your figures.

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