emplifi

Peak season 2026: A retail marketer's strategic guide

Exclusive consumer research on purchase intent, brand engagement, and shopping trends

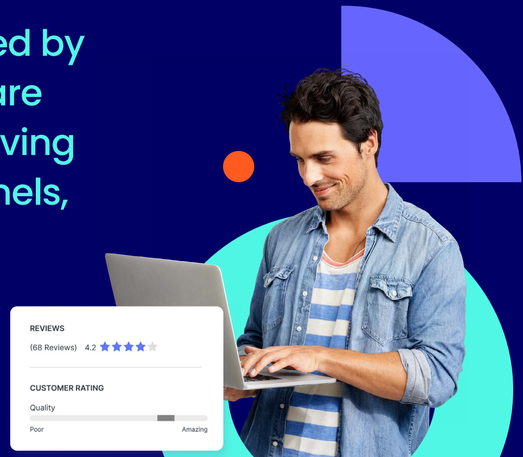


Consumer insights from a survey of 1,638 shoppers across the US and UK

INTRODUCTION

How consumer expectations are reshaping peak season

Peak season is no longer defined by a single moment. Consumers are entering the market earlier, moving between more discovery channels, and taking a more deliberate approach to spending.



The shift

While inflation continues to shape purchasing decisions, it has not reduced consumers' willingness to buy. Instead, it has raised the standards customers use when deciding where to spend. Shoppers are placing greater emphasis on value, trust, convenience, and the overall brand experience when deciding where to spend.

To better understand how these expectations are evolving, we surveyed consumers across the US and UK about their shopping intentions, purchase drivers, and interactions with brands during peak season.

The findings reveal a shift in how consumers discover, evaluate, and buy from brands, and what organizations need to do to earn consideration, build trust, and convert demand during the most competitive retail period of the year.

DID YOU KNOW

9 in 10
consumers
plan to spend the same or more this peak season

49%
of consumers
start thinking about peak season shopping before November

62%
of purchases
are directly through a social media platform

What you'll learn

01
Why peak season starts earlier than most brands think

02
What motivates consumers to **move from consideration to purchase**

03
How discovery, research, and social commerce are **reshaping the customer journey**

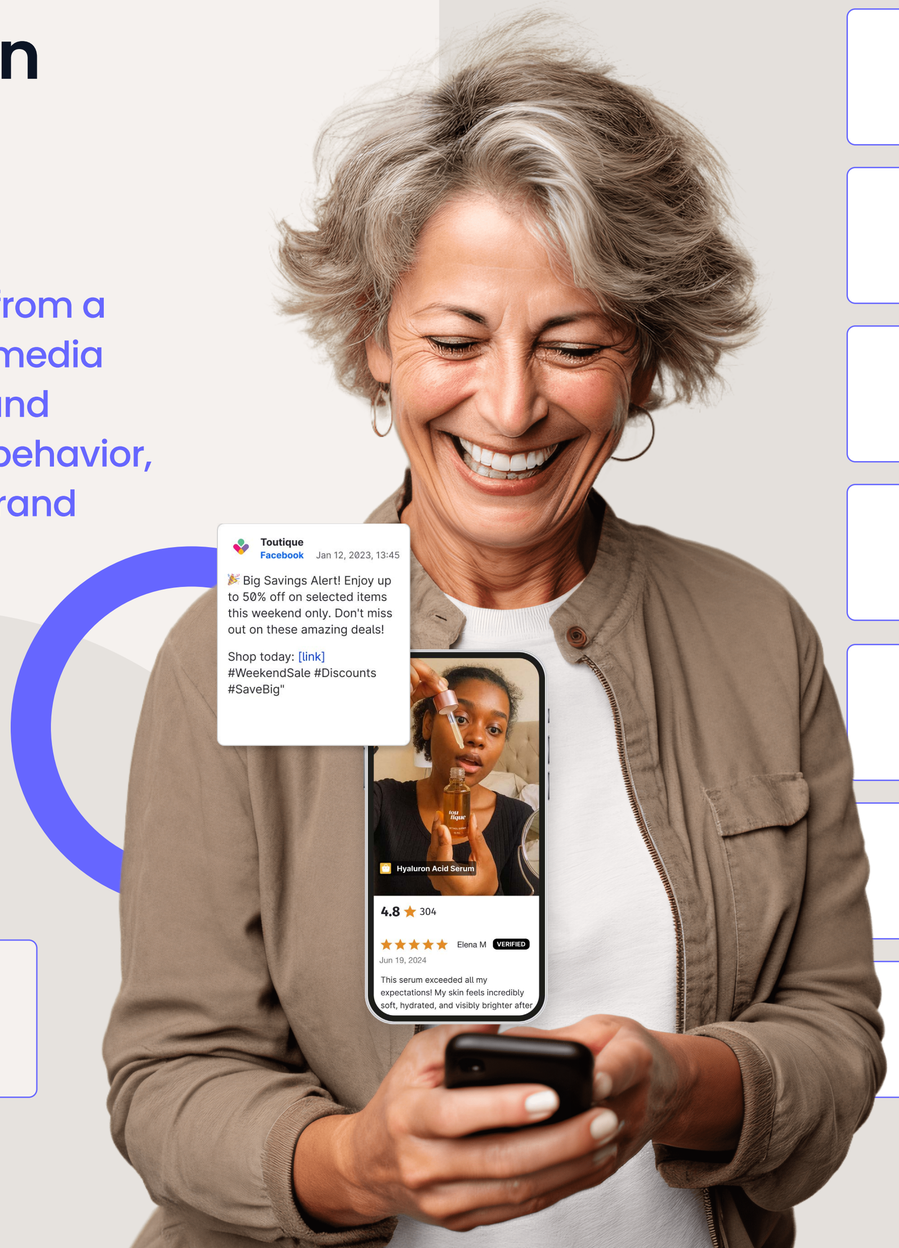
04
Which promotions drive action and which simply meet expectations

05
Why customer experience has become a **direct driver of purchase decisions**

06
How brands can **adapt to changing consumer expectations** during peak season

What you will find in this survey report

This report examines top-line data from a survey of U.S. and UK-based social media users across a wide range of ages and demographics to understand their behavior, preferences, and expectations for brand interactions on social media.



CHAPTER 01: TIMING
Start early or start behind brands think

CHAPTER 02: TRIGGERS
Consumers are motivated by more than price

CHAPTER 03: VALUE
Consumers are choosing quality over quantity

CHAPTER 04: QUALITY
Free shipping is the baseline; everything

CHAPTER 05: DISCOVERY & CUSTOMER SERVICE
Social is where discovery meets customer service

CHAPTER 06: CUSTOMER SPOTLIGHT
How Mango manages social

CHAPTER 07: CHECKLIST
Ready for peak season?

Methodology

- 1,638 consumers surveyed across the US (n=785) and UK (n=853)
- Conducted by Emplifi in partnership with Alchemer, April 14 to May 1, 2026
- All respondents aged 18 to 65
- Active on at least two major social media platforms at least twice per week

CHAPTER 01: TIMING

Peak season starts earlier than most brands think

Nearly half of consumers are thinking about peak season purchases before November arrives. For brands that activate late, a significant portion of the consideration journey has already begun.

The idea that peak season starts with Black Friday no longer reflects how consumers shop. Many consumers begin researching products, comparing options, and building purchase intent weeks before the promotional period begins.

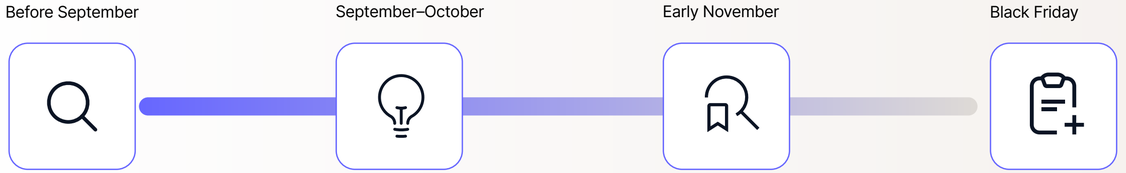
The data highlights just how early this process starts. One in five consumers begins thinking about holiday shopping before September, while more than a third start purchasing before Black Friday. These consumers are actively evaluating options and identifying the brands they trust long before peak promotional activity begins.

Key insight:
Peak season demand does not appear overnight. **Consumers signal their interests through conversations, searches, and engagement long before they purchase.** Brands that can identify those signals and automatically activate relevant content and experiences gain an advantage before peak season competition intensifies.

Most consumers begin their holiday shopping journey before Black Friday

Consumers start planning and purchasing months in advance.

THINKING ABOUT HOLIDAY SHOPPING



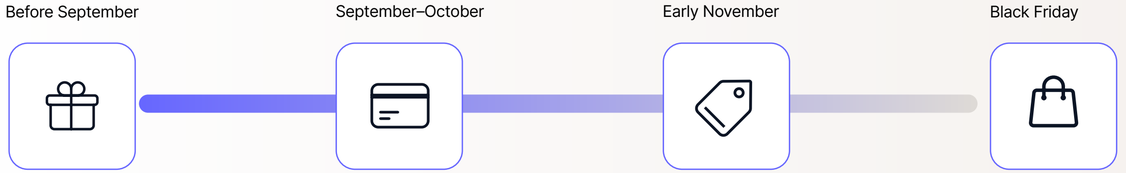
20%
One in five consumers are already planning.

49%
Nearly half of consumers are thinking about holiday shopping.

75%
Three in four consumers are thinking about holiday shopping.

86%
Most consumers have started planning.

PURCHASING HOLIDAY GIFTS



13%
Early buyers emerge.

38%
More than one-third have started purchasing.

65%
Nearly two-thirds have started purchasing gifts.

86%
Most consumers have begun purchasing.

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CHAPTER 02: TRIGGERS

Consumers need more than discounts to buy

Promotions and discounts are the strongest trigger for peak season shopping, cited by 55% of consumers. But gift ideas and inspiration trigger 51%, while budget planning content triggers 48%.

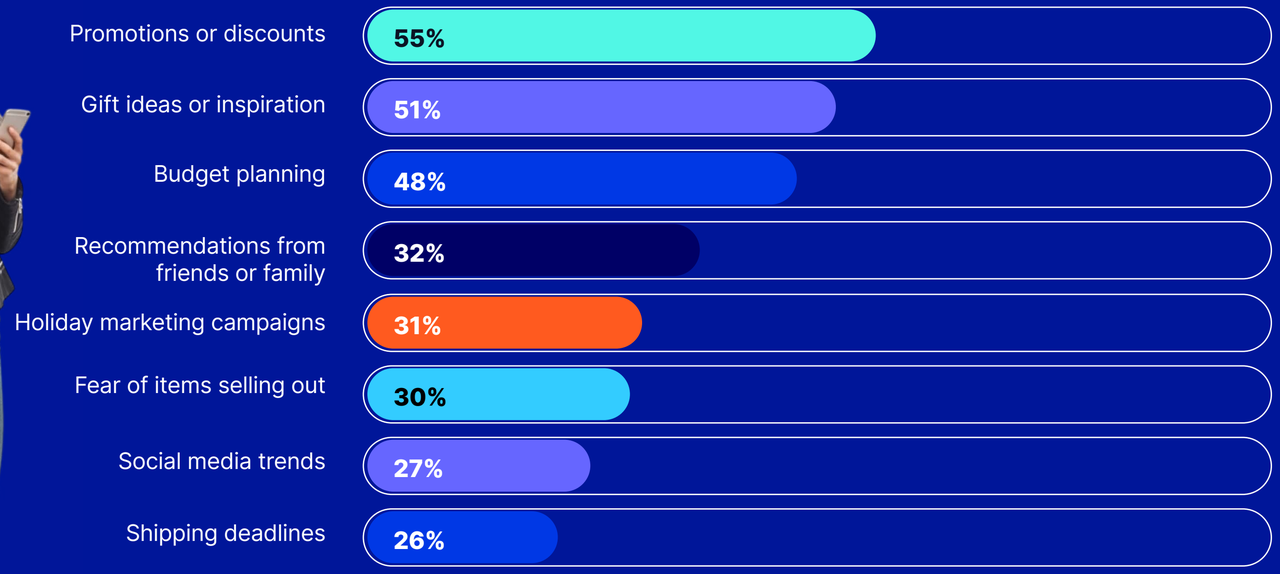


These are not price-driven behaviors. They reflect consumers looking for guidance, ideas, and planning support before they are ready to buy. The gap between all three triggers is just 7 percentage points, suggesting that discounts alone are not enough to engage the full range of holiday shoppers.

The consumers who respond to inspiration and planning content are not a niche segment. They represent a substantial share of the market and often begin their shopping journeys earlier, creating opportunities for brands to build consideration before promotional competition intensifies.

Social media trends are also a stronger trigger in the US than in the UK, influencing **30%** of US consumers compared with **25%** of UK consumers. For brands targeting American shoppers, social discovery should play an important role in peak season activation.

Discounts, inspiration, and planning are nearly equally influential



REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

US consumers respond more strongly to social discovery

Social media trends:
30% US vs 25% UK

Key insight:
Promotions drive action, but inspiration builds consideration.
Brands creating content around consumer interests influence decisions before peak season demand hits.

Discover trends and influence early buying decisions with Emplifi AI-Powered Social Listening.

Explore now

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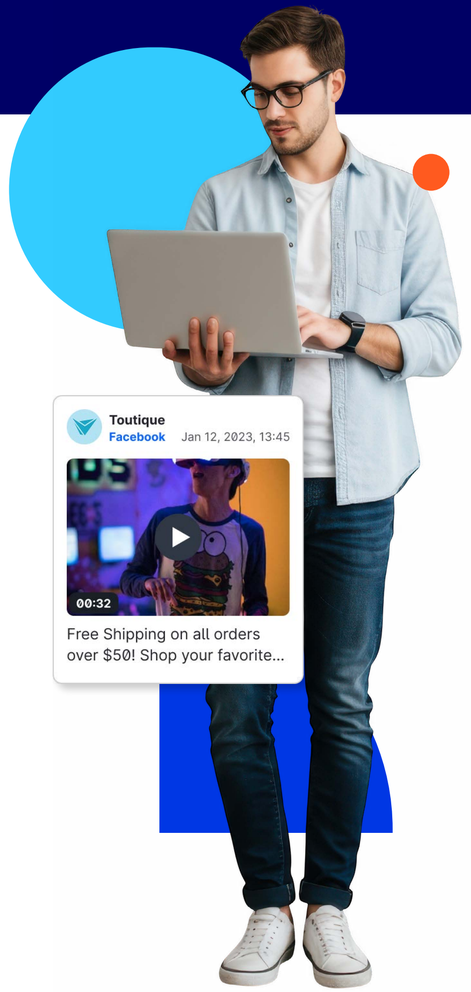
CHAPTER 03: VALUE

Free shipping is the baseline; everything else is the differentiator

Free shipping remains one of the most important factors influencing peak season purchases, with 89% of consumers rating it as important. Consumer expectations around delivery are also rising, **with 73% willing to pay extra for guaranteed delivery.**

Beyond delivery, promotional mechanics continue to influence purchase decisions. Percentage discounts are the most effective promotional lever, cited by **58%** of consumers, while loyalty rewards (**46%**) and early access offers (**42%**) also resonate with a substantial share of shoppers.

Regional differences suggest consumers respond to different value propositions. UK shoppers are more influenced by percentage discounts and loyalty rewards, while US consumers are more responsive to dollar-off promotions. The most effective promotional strategies reflect these market-specific preferences rather than relying on a single approach.



THE BASELINE

89% **FREE SHIPPING**
Consumers expect it

THE STRONGEST DIFFERENTIATOR

73% **GUARANTEED DELIVERY**
Consumers would pay extra for it

OTHER DIFFERENTIATORS

58% Percentage discounts

46% Loyalty rewards

42% Early access

Key insight:
Free shipping has become the cost of entry. The brands that differentiate are those that combine convenience, value, and exclusivity to influence where consumers ultimately choose to spend.

REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

UK consumers respond more strongly to value and relationship mechanics:

Percentage discounts: 61% UK vs 54% US **Loyalty rewards:** 50% UK vs 42% US

US consumers respond more strongly to straight price reductions:

Dollar-off promotions: 42% US vs 24% UK

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CHAPTER 04: QUALITY

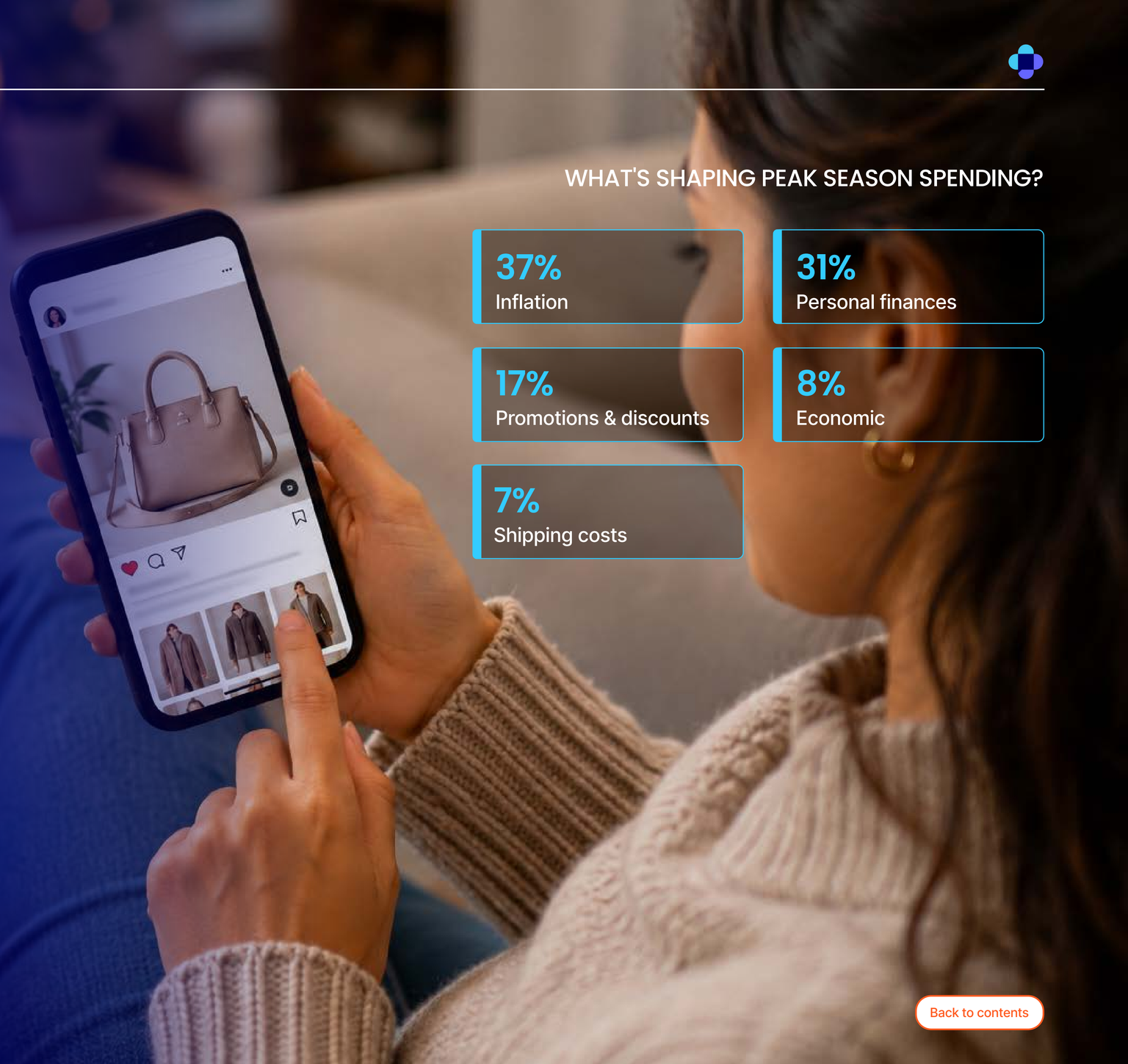
Consumers are choosing quality over quantity

Inflation continues to shape peak season behavior, but consumers are not simply hunting for the lowest price. More people plan to buy fewer, higher-quality gifts than to increase the number of lower-cost purchases.

This is a deliberate shift. Consumers are becoming more selective about where they spend. Quality, durability, and confidence in a purchase now carry more weight than volume.

Brands that lead with price alone risk missing the third of consumers who have actively decided to spend more on less.

- **33%** plan to buy fewer, higher-quality gifts
- **28%** plan to buy more, lower-cost gifts
- **Build confidence** every stage of the customer journey



WHAT'S SHAPING PEAK SEASON SPENDING?

- **37%** Inflation
- **31%** Personal finances
- **17%** Promotions & discounts
- **8%** Economic
- **7%** Shipping costs

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Most likely holiday gift purchases by category

	TOTAL	US	UK
CLOTHING OR APPAREL	70%	69%	70%
GIFT CARDS	50%	56%	45%
LUXURY ITEMS i.e Designer goods	35%	32%	38%
BEAUTY PRODUCTS	52%	43%	59%
HOME PRODUCTS	43%	43%	44%
EXPERIENCES i.e Travel, events, dining	31%	27%	35%
TECHNOLOGY OR ELECTRONICS	51%	54%	48%
DIGITAL PRODUCTS i.e Apps, gaming, online services	36%	39%	33%
SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES i.e Streaming, subscription boxes	22%	23%	21%

Key insight:
Consumers are spending less on quantity and more on confidence. AI helps brands find trusted content, deliver it to the right audiences, and scale meaningful customer connections. The winners will be the brands that turn trust into action.



Explore Autonomous CX and see how Emplifi helps brands build trust, reduce friction, and drive purchase decisions at scale.

Explore now

Base: Total respondents (n=1,638) | U.S. (n=853)
Which types of products are you most likely to purchase online as holiday gifts? (Select all that apply).

= Significantly lower/higher than other country

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CHAPTER 04: DISCOVERY & SERVICE

Social is where discovery, service, and purchase decisions converge

Social media now influences every stage of the customer journey during peak season. Consumers discover products, research brands, ask questions, seek support, and make purchase decisions across the same channels.



For brands, discovery, service, and commerce are no longer separate functions, they are one connected experience.

For consumers, every interaction contributes to the same brand experience. A brand that creates compelling content but fails to respond when a customer reaches out is undermining its own marketing investment. Brand responsiveness on social media makes **86%** of consumers more likely to purchase. That is not a satisfaction metric. It is a revenue signal.

Expectations do not ease during peak season. Nearly nine in ten consumers expect a response within 24 hours, regardless of the time of year. Shipping delays, product defects, and returns account for the majority of customer inquiries, and they are highly predictable.

Brands that prepare for these issues before the season starts are better positioned to maintain responsiveness, build trust, and turn customer service into a competitive advantage during the busiest retail period of the year.

See how leading retailers use Emplifi to automate customer engagement, streamline care, and drive loyalty during peak season.

Book a demo

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86%

Responsive brands drive purchases

WHY THIS MATTERS

57%
Have contacted a brand on social for customer service

88%
Expect a response within 24 hours during peak season

PEOPLE CONTACT BRANDS THROUGH

DMs	60%
Messenger	46%
Comments	38%
Mentions	31%
Replies	29%
Tagged posts	26%

PEOPLE CONTACT BRANDS ABOUT

Shipping	40%
Product defects	40%
Support questions	38%
Returns	37%
Tracking	34%
Promotions	31%
Product questions	30%

Key insight:
Consumers expect fast responses, but many of the most common inquiries are routine and repetitive. **Autonomous CX** can help brands automate responses to common issues such as shipping delays, returns, and order tracking without sacrificing customer experience.

REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

Customer service conversations happen on different platforms in different markets. Facebook remains the dominant support channel in the US (**65%**), while UK consumers are more likely to contact brands on X (**35%**).



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CHAPTER 06: SPOTLIGHT

How Mango manages 1.4 million social interactions without losing the brand



Mango operates across five brand lines and manages hundreds of pieces of content each month across Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, and Pinterest.

Before Emplifi, content planning, publishing, analytics, and community management were spread across multiple tools. Teams lacked a unified view of performance and customer conversations, making it difficult to operate efficiently at scale.

During peak season, that kind of fragmentation becomes a business risk. With consumers expecting fast responses and seamless experiences, brands need connected workflows and real-time visibility across channels.

With Emplifi, Mango unified publishing, community management, and analytics in a single platform, giving teams a global view across all brand lines and markets.

What they did:

- Unified publishing across 20+ social profiles into a single shared calendar
- Consolidated all customer comments and DMs from every platform into one inbox
- Replaced manual reporting with real-time analytics dashboards accessible across the organization
- Used performance data to identify creator collaborations as their highest-sentiment content format

Business impact:

- Faster response times across all platforms and markets
- Consistent brand voice maintained across five distinct brand lines
- Scale increased without adding operational complexity
- Creator partnerships identified and optimized as a repeatable growth lever

700 Monthly pieces of content across **20+ profiles**

1.4M Social interactions managed **in one place**

90–100% **Positive sentiment** on top creator collaborations

See how Emplifi unifies publishing, care, and analytics in one platform.

Book a demo

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CHAPTER 07: CHECKLIST

Ready for peak season?
Here is what needs to be in place.



1 SEPTEMBER
Build consideration early

- Publish gift inspiration content, curated collections, and product storytelling
- Activate early access offers for loyalty members
- Optimize social content for search and discovery
- Audit product descriptions for accuracy, completeness, and AI discoverability

OUTCOME
Stronger awareness and demand before promotions begin

2 OCTOBER
Build your promotional stack

- Ensure free shipping is live and clearly communicated
- Layer discounts and loyalty rewards on top of free shipping
- Tailor promotional mechanics by market
- Test social commerce experiences across key channels
- Train and deploy autonomous agents for high-volume customer inquiries

OUTCOME
Promotions are operationally ready to scale

3 NOVEMBER
Convert into purchase

- Activate promotional content alongside quality and value messaging
- Finalize peak season customer care workflows
- Deploy automated responses for predictable inquiries such as shipping updates, tracking, and returns
- Monitor and optimize autonomous agent performance across social channels

OUTCOME
Higher conversions with reduced support burden

4 DECEMBER
Protect revenue & reputation

- Maintain response times that meet consumer expectations
- Monitor DMs, comments, mentions, and tagged posts from a unified workflow
- Capture and amplify customer content generated during peak season

OUTCOME
Protect customer experience during peak demand

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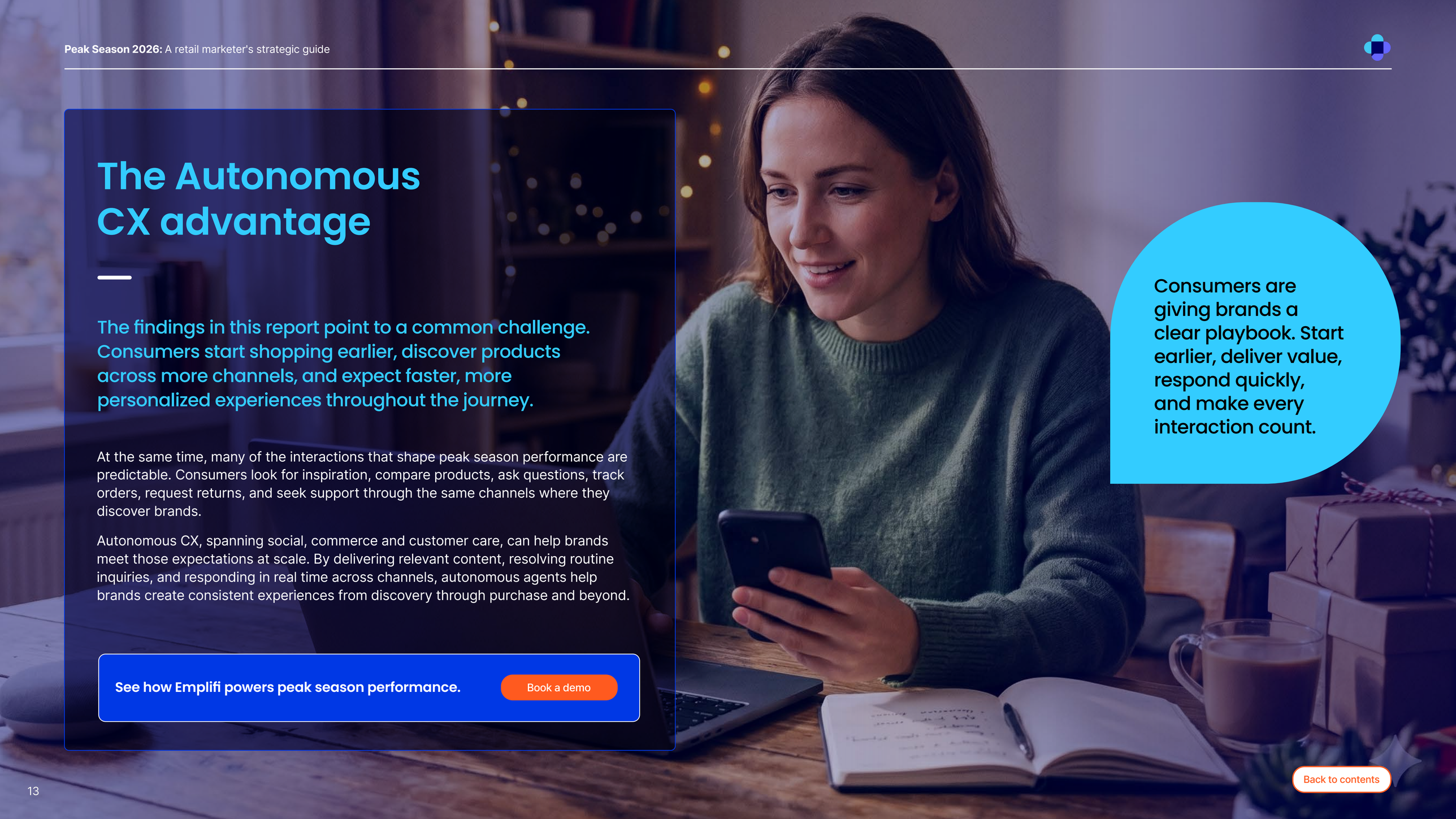
The Autonomous CX advantage

The findings in this report point to a common challenge. Consumers start shopping earlier, discover products across more channels, and expect faster, more personalized experiences throughout the journey.

At the same time, many of the interactions that shape peak season performance are predictable. Consumers look for inspiration, compare products, ask questions, track orders, request returns, and seek support through the same channels where they discover brands.

Autonomous CX, spanning social, commerce and customer care, can help brands meet those expectations at scale. By delivering relevant content, resolving routine inquiries, and responding in real time across channels, autonomous agents help brands create consistent experiences from discovery through purchase and beyond.

See how Emplifi powers peak season performance. Book a demo



Consumers are giving brands a clear playbook. Start earlier, deliver value, respond quickly, and make every interaction count.

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Emplifi is the only **Autonomous CX** platform unifying social marketing, commerce, and customer care for more than 20,000 brands worldwide. Powered by Fuel AI, built on more than 5T of data, and recognized as a leader by leading industry analysts, Emplifi helps enterprise teams orchestrate connected customer journeys and deliver personalized experiences at scale, turning every customer touchpoint into a competitive advantage.

Build your AI-enabled social operations roadmap

Identify the workflows, integrations, and operational gaps that matter most for your next stage of growth.

Talk to an expert

