SEASONAL INTELLIGENCE SERIES

HOLIDAY RETAIL

Reach high-intent Q4 shoppers with contextual precision across CTV, audio, web, and mobile.



$1T+

2025 Holiday Retail Sales, A First

NRF, via Zeta Global

54%

Of 2026 Shoppers Plan to Spend $500+

Zeta Global, 2026

71%

Used Search, Social or AI to Find Gift Ideas

Basis ImpactIQ x GWI, 2026

The 2026 Holiday Retail Opportunity

Holiday retail is the largest and longest season of the year, and in 2026 it is more fragmented than ever. **The shopping window now spans September through December, the shopper is leaning on AI and social before ever reaching a brand, and Black Friday no longer defines the season on its own.**

Holiday retail sales exceeded $1 trillion for the first time in 2025, growing 4.1% year over year. The National Retail Federation expects another 4.4% increase in 2026. More than half of shoppers plan to spend $500+ on gifts this year, and nearly three-quarters used a digital tool to shape their gift list.

$1T+	4.4%	54%	49%
2025 holiday retail sales, a first	NRF's projected 2026 growth	Plan to spend $500+ on gifts	Felt confident after last year's purchase

FOR AGENCIES & ADVERTISERS

Getting in front of the right shopper in the right context is the difference between capturing Q4 budgets and being invisible during the season's peak decision moments. Contextual targeting is an effective, scalable way to reach this audience without cookies or audience IDs.

SECTION 01

4 Trends Reshaping Holiday Retail in 2026

Why the shopping window now runs a full four months, not one weekend.

How AI and social shape the gift list before a brand ever appears.

Why deals now validate a decision instead of driving it.

01 The Season Now Runs September Through December

Holiday shopping no longer lives in one window. Shoppers are starting earlier and buying throughout the season instead of reacting to a single peak.

68% shop early specifically to avoid shipping delays. (Basis)

34% say they're starting their holiday shopping earlier every year. (Basis)

57% shop throughout the year specifically to catch deals as they appear. (Basis)

IMPLICATION

Show up early and stay present. A late, single burst push around Black Friday misses most of the buying journey.

02 Black Friday & Cyber Monday: Big, But No Longer the Center

The big weekend still draws a crowd and real dollars, but its grip on the season has loosened as deals run all year long.

202.9M shoppers over the record 2025 Thanksgiving to Cyber Monday window. (NRF, via Zeta)

$14.25B in record Cyber Monday sales, the largest online shopping day of the season. (NRF, via Zeta)

54% of shoppers say it's not critical to shop that exact weekend since deals now run all season. (Basis)

IMPLICATION

Spread flights across the season. Retailers can't afford to build a holiday strategy around a single promotional weekend.

03 AI Shapes the Shortlist, Not the Checkout

Search, social, and AI now form the consideration set well before a shopper reaches a retailer or a brand.

71% used at least one digital tool, search, social, or AI, to find gift ideas in 2025. (Basis)

80%+ of shoppers plan to use AI at some point in their 2026 holiday shopping. (Zeta)

51% of AI users turn to it to find deals, the top use case, ahead of generating gift ideas or comparing products. (Zeta)

IMPLICATION

Win early visibility across search, social, and AI, or risk never making the shortlist a purchase gets made from.

04 Deals Are Validation, Not the Decision

Price still matters, but the lowest price no longer wins on its own. Shoppers use a deal to confirm a purchase they've mostly already made.

42% judge a deal by whether the final price fits their budget, ahead of the discount percentage itself at 33%. (Basis)

13% of shoppers now cite price and discounts as what drives their retailer choice, down from 28% in 2025 and replaced by more balanced factors like reviews and shipping. (Zeta)

IMPLICATION

Lead with trust signals: reviews, shipping clarity, and value, not just the deepest discount.

The holiday shopper isn't waiting for Black Friday anymore. They're already four months into a decision that AI, social, and search helped shape.

Peer39's analysis of 2026 holiday shopping behavior

$1T+

Holiday retail sales crossed $1 trillion for the first time in 2025, up 4.1% year over year. NRF projects another 4.4% increase in 2026.

National Retail Federation, via Zeta Global 2026 Holiday Shopping Trends Report

SECTION 02

The Ad Market Heading Into Q4 2026

Why CTV inventory gets scarce and premium fast once December hits.

How retail media keeps pulling budget toward a shrinking set of networks.

Where category-level ad spend is growing fastest, and where it isn't.

Shopper behavior is only half the picture. The media landscape advertisers buy into shifts just as sharply heading into Q4: inventory tightens, prices climb, and budgets move toward the channels shoppers actually trust for discovery.

01 CTV Viewership Peaks in December

Holiday content drives a sharp seasonal surge in streaming, and that attention is increasingly ad-supported.

54% of all TV viewing went to streaming on Christmas Day 2025, a single-day record, with 55.1 billion viewing minutes. (Nielsen)

47.5% of TV time overall went to streaming across December 2025, also a monthly record. (Nielsen)

13.8% CTV ad spend growth forecast for 2026, among the fastest growing channels IAB tracks. (IAB)

IMPLICATION

CTV inventory gets scarce and premium fast in December. Lock placements early and diversify across platforms.

02 Retail Media Keeps Compounding, and Concentrating

Budgets are steadily shifting toward retailer-owned inventory, but the growth is landing with fewer and fewer networks.

$69.3B projected US retail media ad spend in 2026, up from $58.8B in 2025, about 18% growth. (eMarketer)

89% of 2026's incremental retail media dollars are on pace to go to just two networks, Amazon Ads and Walmart Connect. (eMarketer)

IMPLICATION

Retail media budgets concentrate early and narrowly. Align contextual and retail-data strategy before Q4 locks in, and look beyond the two biggest networks for incremental reach.

03 Auction Prices Spike With Demand

More advertisers chasing the same high-intent inventory pushes CPMs up sharply right when budgets are largest.

+13% higher average CPMs in Q4 versus Q3, based on Google Ad Manager data. (Publift analysis)

+40% higher CPMs during Black Friday/Cyber Monday week versus July's weekly average. (Publift analysis)

IMPLICATION

Precise, well-targeted placements matter most exactly when competition, and prices, peak.

04 Category Ad Spend Is Splitting Unevenly

Not every holiday category is growing ad investment at the same rate, and the gap between leaders and laggards is widening.

+64% holiday ad spend growth for pet supplies, the fastest growing subcategory tracked. (Sensor Tower)

+52% holiday ad spend growth for wearable technology. (Sensor Tower)

+48% holiday ad spend growth for consumer electronics. (Sensor Tower)

2% ad spend growth for apparel, the largest subcategory tracked, the slowest of the group. (Sensor Tower)

IMPLICATION

Category-level budget shifts change where competition, and opportunity, concentrates this season.

SECTION 03

How Peer39 Powers Your Holiday Campaigns

Peer39's own contextual data, at a glance.

Six Peer39 solutions built for holiday retail, spanning CTV, audio, web, and mobile.

Where to get the full Category Recommendations Sheet.

Peer39's Contextual Data, at a Glance

4,300+
categories across CTV, Display, Mobile, and OLV
Peer39

150+
data dimensions used to classify inventory
Peer39

2.5B
unique URLs and apps classified daily
Peer39

Peer39 helps agencies and advertisers reach holiday shoppers with precision across CTV, audio, web, and mobile, without relying on cookies or compromising brand safety.

SOLUTION	WHAT IT DOES FOR HOLIDAY RETAIL
CTV Contextual Intelligence	Genre, channel, and program-level holiday categories across networks including Hallmark Channel, Food Network, Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, and QVC+/HSN+, plus Christmas, Holiday, Thanksgiving, and New Year's Eve programming. Authenticated programming means no blind inventory, only verified channels and content.
Post-Buy Analytics	See exactly where holiday campaigns ran and how they performed, across 75+ reporting dimensions including CTV Quality Score, completion rates, brand safety, and attention. Mid-flight visibility lets buyers optimize before peak spend windows close, not after.

SOLUTION	WHAT IT DOES FOR HOLIDAY RETAIL
Contextual Targeting	Place ads alongside the content holiday shoppers are actively consuming: gift guides, holiday shopping deals, entertaining and hosting content, and seasonal coupon pages, without third-party cookies or audience IDs. Activate across CTV, audio, web, and mobile app inventory.
Social Predict	Trend-responsive categories built from social signals: Christmas, Gift Giving, Trending Toys, Traveling for the Holidays, Black Friday and Cyber Monday, New Year's Eve, and Interest: Thrifty Shopping. Stay aligned with what holiday shoppers are talking about in real time.
Third-Party Data Partner	Extend reach with GoldfishAds' holiday purchase-intent and social-interest segments, including D2C Holiday Shoppers, Holiday Value Shoppers, Subscription Box Gifters and Subscribers, Holiday Hosting and Entertaining, Holiday Quick-Trip Shoppers, AI-Powered Gift Finders, and shopping and coupon interest segments.
Brand Safety & Suitability	Structured exclusion controls for web, mobile in-app, CTV, and podcast audio, including Safe from Fake CTV Content, safe-from-adult and divisive-news environments, and issue-level web exclusions. Preserve reach in relevant holiday contexts without over-blocking.

Category Recommendations, Companion Document

A full Category Recommendations Sheet is available from your Peer39 account team. It includes:

- **Context Categories (Web)**: Seasonal: Black Friday/Cyber Monday, Christmas, Holiday Shopping, Holiday Toys, Thanksgiving, Society: Holidays & Celebrations, and more
- **OTT-CTV**: Genre/Channel, Program Level, Cable TV Channels, and Program Networks
- **Contextual Data Marketplace**: Social Predict and the GoldfishAds third-party partner segments
- **Mobile App & Mobile Games**: Catalog, Shopping, Food & Drink, House & Home, and Lifestyle Apps
- **Safety & Suitability**: Web negative categories, Mobile In-App exclusions, OTT/CTV and podcast audio safe environments
- **Keyword List**: 150+ holiday-specific keywords for custom targeting

Sources

PEER39 DATA

- Peer39, Holiday Retail 2026 Category Recommendations, from your Peer39 account team
- Peer39, platform category and data-dimension figures

THIRD-PARTY INDUSTRY RESEARCH

- Zeta Global, "2026 Holiday Shopping Trends Report: The Rise of the Deliberate Shopper"
- Basis ImpactIQ x GWI, "2026 Winter Holidays Shopping Trends" (n=2,006), fielded May 2026
- National Retail Federation, Holiday Retail Sales data, 2025 to 2026
- Sensor Tower, "Holiday Season Ad Spend 2026," via WWD/Sourcing Journal
- IAB, 2026 CTV Ad Spend Growth Forecast, via StreamTV Insider, Jan 2026
- Nielsen, "The Gauge," December 2025 streaming records, press release, Jan 2026
- eMarketer, US Retail Media Ad Spending Forecast, H2 2025/2026
- Publift, "Holiday Season Strategy for Publishers," Q4 2026 CPM analysis based on Google Ad Manager data

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