



# Your small business holiday survival guide

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Everything you need to know to survive & thrive  
this busy season

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## Are you ready to deliver joy to the masses?

Cheerful tidings: Holiday sales are predicted to surge this year to a record \$83 billion –the [highest since 2011!](#) A perfect combo of lower gas prices and jollier jobs reports means consumers will have more cash on hand to shop small businesses like yours. In this survival guide, you'll learn tips and tricks for jingle-bell rocking your sales goals, managing your finances, and preserving your holiday spirit along the way.

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# 7 steps to hiring helpful seasonal employees

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Do you tend to work out more leading up to the holidays, in anticipation of extra servings of mashed potatoes, honeyed ham, and sugar cookies? As a business owner, you should take a page out of your own cardio playbook and make sure you have a robust hiring strategy in place to beef up your team in preparation for the busy season, too.

Our suggestion? Adopt the “Hollywood model”: assemble a small, smart team of temporary or contracted seasonal employees to meet your unique demands for busy season, and disband when the holidays come to an end. Focusing on lean, efficient teams can help you maintain cash flow and promote top-line growth, especially when you consider the increasing costs of full-time staff (like healthcare, disability insurance, and vacation time)!

Before following our seven steps to hiring the right seasonal employees, review your finances to see if a [small business loan](#) could help fund the team you need to jingle bell-rock your sales goals this year.

**Pro tip:** don't limit your planning to “day-of” situations! Plan ahead for the holiday rush by determining what marketing, design, or technical expertise you could use to make sure your website and marketing campaigns are up to snuff, too.

## 1. Identify your staffing and skills gaps.

What are the different seasonal employee roles you might need to staff up for? Common holiday “gaps” could include serving customers on the sales floor, managing merchandising and receiving, responding to customers enquiries online or via phone, or managing and fulfilling orders in distribution centers.

## 2. Figure out what type of worker you'll need.

This is not your grandparents' job market: it's easier than ever before to hire high-quality, professional seasonal employees like web designers, marketing managers, and accountants on an independent contractor basis.



For example, according to the National Retail Federation, online sales in particular are predicted to surge this year. Would it benefit your sales to hire a website developer on a one-time project basis to make sure your ecommerce abilities are up to par on the back-end? Consumers are more savvy (and mobile) than ever before: it's weird not to have a website and no longer acceptable to have a basic one either. On the other hand, maybe it would behoove you to hire a part-time social media specialist throughout the holiday season to utilize your social media platforms to engage online shoppers and drive foot traffic to your storefront. What skill set would make the biggest impact for your business?

If you're looking to plump up certain areas of your staff on a temporary basis for the holidays, keep track of how those skill sets benefit your business: if you decide a certain role is particularly valuable in an evergreen way, you can always hire for that position full-time after the holidays!

**Pro tip:** If you know what projects you want to complete, but are struggling to find the right individual on your own, specialized online "marketplaces" like our partner [99designs](#) can help! With price points designed for small businesses like yours, 99designs can help you tackle your holiday needs for marketing/advertising, web design, packaging and labels, and more.

### 3. Find the right people.

So now that you know the type of seasonal employee(s) that you'll need, how exactly do you find them? The first step: rethink your preconceptions about what work actually needs to be performed onsite with you! Roles traditionally performed in person, like administrative support, bookkeeping, or public relations, can now be completed remotely with ease.

If the work you want to accomplish can be performed remotely (think: website updates, marketing copy, etc.), you can find professional freelancers via online platforms like Thumbtack or Upwork—or send targeted messages to people whose profiles appeal to you on LinkedIn. If you'll need folks onsite, post ads on your local Craigslist page and in your local paper, or reach out for referrals from friends, family, and industry colleagues on Facebook and LinkedIn.

### 4. Know the law.

When you find some folks who are intelligent, hardworking, and excited to be onboard with your business for the season, there are two major steps you may need to consider before signing any offer letters.

First, it might be wise to acquaint yourself with state and federal fair hiring practices and job discrimination laws—and know how to implement them. For



example, to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, have policies in place that clearly define and prohibit racist, sexist or other impermissible types of discrimination and unlawful harassment in the workplace, among other things. If you have questions about any employment laws related to seasonal employees, make sure you talk to a lawyer.

Second, make sure you're correctly classifying your seasonal employees according to state and federal laws (think: part-time vs. full-time, or contractor vs. employee). For example, you can't treat a worker like an independent contractor for tax purposes, and then use that person like a full-time employee in practice. You could end up being held liable for payroll taxes down the road if you've misclassified any workers. It's best to cover all your bases with your financial advisor first to assess what your needs are.

**Pro tip:** when drafting your contracts for temporary employees, don't forget about the days after the holidays! In addition to the typical rush to return or exchange items, the day after Christmas is now the second busiest in-store shopping day of the year. Check out LegalZoom for all the easy and affordable contracts you need to get through the season, including an [NDA!](#)

## 5. Get it in writing.

Before you let any new seasonal employees lift even one jolly finger, make sure to get all employment agreements in writing! A lack of written contracts, including Work for Hire or Consulting agreement forms, is a common small business mistake, and a little effort upfront can save you a lot of holiday-related headaches later. Specify the terms and conditions of their employment with an Employment Offer Letter that confirms their position, title, start date, salary, benefits, specified probationary period, a statement of the at-will nature of employment, etc. Don't forget to differentiate between a full-time employee and an independent contractor!

If your business has any vital intellectual property (like a signature recipe, product design, or other trade secret), considering asking your temporary employees to sign a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) to protect your proprietary information. An NDA is a legally binding contract that carefully outlines and defines any information you do not want your employees to share with a third party. If your employee breaches the NDA, you can take legal action in court.

## 6. Create a handbook.

After you've signed the dotted line on your new seasonal employees' contracts, an employee handbook is a useful tool to help guide them through the busiest of days—and set clear expectations for the professional relationship! Any good handbook should cover benefits provided to your workers, company policies (ex. social media rules to prevent bad branding!), and reporting structures so there isn't any room for



confusion.

This time of year, make sure to add a special section solely dedicated to holiday survival: include a step-by-step guide for customer dispute resolution, as well as a breakdown of any seasonal promotions, sales, and gift/returns policies. For better or for worse, shopper stress can run high during the holiday season—so make sure you set your team up for success.

## **7. Include all employees in the holiday magic!**

The good news: the economy is doing better, and unemployment rates are falling. The bummer news? That means you'll face steeper competition in hiring quality employees—even on a seasonal basis! Treating all team members—including seasonal employees—like full-time, valuable team members goes a long way in encouraging productivity, so brainstorm ways that you can stand out as an employer and inject some holiday spirit into those extra-long shifts.

Some ideas could include getting each seasonal employee a thoughtful gift, closing operations on public holidays so they can be with their families, and considering your very best performers for full-time employment after the holiday rush passes.

# 6 steps to nailing your holiday inventory

A beautifully decorated storefront, aglow with lights, holly berries, and the squished faces of happy window shoppers.

The perfect seasonal marketing campaign, complete with Black Friday promotions, clever ads, and messages of joy. Eager customers clamoring at the cash register, clutching their credit cards and sneaking occasional gleeful glances at their soon-to-be shortened shopping lists.

Barren shelves and warehouse spaces, filled with the regret of purchases that can't be fulfilled and customers turned away empty-handed, never to return again.

This is a recurring nightmare that too many small business owners have right before the busiest and most profitable season: not enough holiday inventory to go around —and lost sales! Follow these six steps to ensure your holiday inventory game is on point, and ensure you don't lose out on some of your best revenues of the year.

## 1. Budget your way through the blizzard.

The first and most critical step of preparing for busy season is ensuring you have enough cash on hand to purchase the holiday inventory you'll need to fulfill your projected sales goals—plus a little extra for storage, packing and shipping supplies, extra hires, and other unanticipated costs. When you strategize your winter finance plans, don't forget that the gains you'll reap from holiday sales will likely come in a later profit cycle. Be ready to make a hefty upfront investment, because it takes money to make money!

By securing financing ahead of time, you won't run into last-minute cash flow obstacles that put a cap on your holiday season potential. One way great way to finance seasonal surges in spending (and profit-making!) is an affordable term loan. For example, many small business owners use their Funding Circle loan to purchase holiday inventory upfront to last them through their peak selling season, because our low, fixed monthly payments make budgeting predictable and easy.

**Pro tip:** don't limit your planning to "day-of" situations! Plan ahead for the holiday rush by determining what marketing, design, or technical expertise you could use to make sure your website and marketing campaigns are up to snuff, too.



## 2. Produce or purchase enough inventory for the merry occasion.

You know that feeling when grandma doesn't make enough pie, and the tin is empty by the time it's passed to you? Don't do that to your customers: make sure you make or buy enough of your best-selling products to meet customer demand through the new year.

If you're pleased as holiday punch with your current manufacturing setup, just make sure you have enough financing to hit your production goals. However, if you're aiming to expand your operations this year, now is the time to consider affordable local options through [Maker's Row](#), a platform that connects you to the right factories and helps you create your products right here in the United States.

If you work with suppliers, don't be afraid to negotiate or switch it up this year! The folks you buy products and materials from are hoping to meet or exceed last year's sales just like you—so push for good deals, especially discounts for large bulk orders. To find new suppliers, check out directories like [C2FO](#)! Their online marketplace makes it easy to make the right match, and integrate invoices and payments.

Timing is everything these next few months, so for each item you intend to sell for the holidays, make sure you get a delivery date from your vendor or supplier and confirm the quantity you'll receive by that date. Tip: in case an item runs out or becomes unavailable, have acceptable substitute items lined up so you won't slow down your flow of holiday inventory—and ask if your vendor can expedite orders when necessary.

## 3. Clear out room in your holiday workshop.

Why bother making delicious spiced cider if you don't have enough thermoses to store it until it's ready to be enjoyed? The same goes for all the wonderful items you're producing or purchasing in advance of the holidays. If you depend upon warehouse space, make sure it's cleaned out and organized—and have the right transportation or distribution system in place to ship to your store(s) or directly to customers. If you need to expand your warehouse space to hold extra holiday inventory, a term loan is an easy way to afford an upgrade!





If you have less popular products taking up precious space, slash prices and mark them as discount items to move them through the sales cycle and off your shelves. It's all a cost-benefit calculation: if you stand to make higher profit margins on your best-seller holiday products than you do by holding on to slower-moving holiday inventory, it may be in your best interest to reduce prices or even donate those items to a holiday charity drive.

#### **4. Hire special helpers to fill your customer's stockings.**

Sure, Santa Claus gets all the glory—but he's not a one-man show, and for good reason: pleasing all the important customers in your life takes a village! You may not be able to afford bringing on additional full-time hires year-round, but targeted, contracted hires for busy season could make a huge difference in hitting your sales goals—and ensuring you deliver a quality customer experience. (No one likes a frazzled, overworked sales clerk whose patience is three sizes too small.)

For more entry-level retail hands on deck to help keep the store organized, stock shelves, and smile at the cash register, scout via Craigslist, newspaper classifieds, or social media for local college students who may be home for the season looking to make some extra cash for their own stocking stuffers. For specialized hires to help you out with more complex projects like marketing campaigns or website improvements, check out professional freelance sites like [Upwork](#) or [Thumbtack](#).

#### **5. Deliver a merry & bright purchasing experience.**

Now that you have the right people in place to support you through the season, set them up for success by making sure they have effective ways to close sales and create happy customers. If your business is a brick-and-mortar retail storefront, perform an audit of your current point-of-sale (POS) system and decide if it's on your naughty or nice list. If you expect your revenues to grow significantly through busy season, it might be time to invest in a POS system that will grow with you. Look for systems that support mobile payments and are easy to use for both staff and customers. Some solutions even help you track your holiday inventory in real-time so you know when you're running short!

If your business operates via e-commerce only, it's absolutely critical that you have a beautiful (and well-oiled) website that can handle an influx of holiday



orders. Customers have increasingly high expectations for their online shopping experiences, and your website is their only impression of your brand—so an investment in a high-performing and pleasantly designed website could be a gift that keeps on giving! If your site needs some sprucing up, consider outsourcing the renovations to a web development professional through a service like [99designs](#), who can help you deliver a better experience to your customers. For the more tech-savvy business owners, consider building and managing your own e-commerce platform with tools like [Shopify](#) or [Magento](#).

## 6. Make your list, check it twice.

Making purchasing predictions and ensuring you have enough of the right type of holiday inventory is a careful balancing act, so you want to do your best to avoid feeling like a nervous ballerina teetering precariously during a dramatic Nutcracker Suite climax. The risk? If you're manually tracking your holiday inventory with Excel or that notebook you've had since 2010, it might be difficult to promptly know when an item starts selling like snickerdoodles and needs to be reordered. For your business, knowledge is purchasing power—and you should always know how many partridges are left in your pear tree.

One way to prevent your shelves from going empty is using barcode scanners in your POS system and linking them with an inventory management software. That way, you can use the inventory software to create and monitor alerts when a best-seller is running low and reorder before you run out. Luckily, there are many inventory management software options out there to suit your business's unique needs, like [Wasp Barcode](#).

**Pro tip:** barcodes and real-time knowledge of your holiday inventory will help prevent expensive expedited vendor deliveries, and help your employees easily process post-holiday returns. (You know no one keeps their gift receipts these days!)

# 5 ways to win over more holiday shoppers

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There's something about snowfall, reindeer decals, and mistletoe that make people go turkey on holiday shopping. Big box retailers relish the huge profits they rake in this time of year, but that doesn't mean that small businesses like yours shouldn't go after your own slice of the consumer frenzy pie.

It takes a village to compete in the holiday season as a small business - and your amazing products and services will shine even brighter if you hire the right people to help your business stand out.

Like that gaudy blow-up reindeer your neighbor insists on displaying every year, you may not want extra hands onboard all year round—but it might make sense to make the most of your holiday season potential.

Here are five things that can set you apart from your competition—and the five employees that every smart business owner should have onboard to cut through the noise this holiday season:

## 1. A beautiful, responsive website.

You probably already know the stats: more and more savvy consumers these days opt to snap open their laptops instead of driving to the nearest shopping mall—or at the very least, check your business out online before making the trip. With digital devices in their pockets at all times, consumers can browse, research, and compare prices online before ever stepping foot in your store. In this day and age, it's no longer acceptable to have a basic or poorly-functioning website.

Another consideration? Mobile! Mobile shopping is on the rise, and if your website isn't responsive to mobile format, you may be delivering a poor first impression to prospective customers.



**WHO YOU'LL NEED:** A website developer and/or designer on a project basis to polish up your website and ensure your ecommerce abilities are up to par on the back-end. You could try your hand with self service sites like SquareSpace or StoreEnvy.

## 2. A comprehensive marketing campaign.

More than ever, small businesses like yours are investing in comprehensive online marketing, because it's an effective and affordable way to fatten up your holiday sales. Here are three things to focus upon:

- **Email marketing.** Bonding with customers directly via their inboxes is still the most effective marketing channel for small businesses. Reach out to your email list of customers with a coupon or gift certificate that they can use and share with friends and family! It's a no-brainer way to promote new products, and humblebrag about your most unique or best-selling items.
- **Social media.** Are your best-sellers ready for their close-up? The holiday season is prime time for being active on your social media channels and blog (if you have one). You can alert your online audience of promotions and sales via Twitter and Facebook, and share your best product photos with links back to your mobile-responsive website to tempt customers into an instant online purchase. Tip: social channels are a great way to demonstrate your commitment to stellar customer service by responding to customer questions and complaints in a jolly way.
- **Paid social.** These days, social media platforms are good for more than just photo-sharing: a little budget can go a long way in prospecting new customers, too. In particular, Facebook is a very easy-to-use platform for business owners who are working with modest budgets, but wish to target a specific type of customer in a locally defined area.

**Our tip?** Hire for both sides of the brain: it's critical to have the right balance of technical and creative skills on any marketing team. To make the most of your clever email copy and beautiful graphics, you'll also need to know your way around retargeting and advertising bids.

To rock the aforementioned marketing channels, stop guessing and get the facts: make sure you have the right automation and reporting tools in place to make campaigns as painless as possible to create and evaluate. For example, A/B testing your email campaigns with a tool like Hubspot helps you see what works, what doesn't, and how to drive leads more efficiently in the future.

**WHO YOU'LL NEED:** A social media and marketing consultant who knows how to use a modest budget to maximize impact in your local neighborhood and online. If you see stellar results, consider hiring a part-time marketing specialist to keep up your momentum even after the holiday cheer fades into the new year.



### 3. A brand design that's hard to forget.

Everyone knows what the Nordstrom logo looks like, and can recognize an Apple commercial from a mile away. A clearly defined brand bolstered by the use of clever logos, videos and high-quality visuals is on the rise - so don't let bigger businesses with deep pockets overshadow you!

Your brand strategy should build trust and credibility with customers—and be memorable in such a way that no customer would ever guess you store extra inventory in your garage. Would your sales benefit from a video of your product to include on your website, rich, branded illustrations to use in your online ads, or eye-catching murals or signage for your storefront?

**WHO'LL YOU NEED:** A freelance designer or videographer to produce a beautiful, effective library of content you can use to identify and advertise your brand. You can search for independent contracts on platforms like Thumbtack or Upwork, or work with our partner 99designs to find the right artist for you! There are also a growing number of free sites for engaging stock photos, like [Pexels](#).

### 4. A better, faster shipping strategy.

It's a small world after all—so know your customer, and anticipate their logistical needs. First, if you can find room in your budget, offer free shipping to customers who meet a minimum online spend threshold. Helping customers save on shipping costs can help you compete against bigger businesses who may offer lower prices overall per product.

Second, reposition your business to the center of the world by offering international shipping. Geographic borders are increasingly invisible to consumers, so rethink your distribution strategy to appeal to their multicultural tastes. Bonus: this opens up your small business to a not-so-small market, beyond the confines of your local community —and makes your sales less sensitive to fluctuations in local spending.

Third, appeal to consumer's love of instant gratification by taking advantage of trends in the sharing economy through local on-demand delivery. For example, Shopify and Uber have teamed up to help you get your products [delivered instantly](#) to customers —with only the touch of a smartphone!

**WHO YOU'LL NEED:** An existing, online distributor or vendor network who you can partner with to sell your products worldwide without having to map out the logistics all by yourself or pony up for intensive capital investments.



## 5. An experience that's uniquely yours.

Big retailers spend inconceivable sums every year to spruce up and decorate their stores for the holidays—with the same old Santa, wreath and tree routine as every other department store in America. As a small business without strict rules trickling down from Corporate Headquarters, brainstorm ways to have a little fun and offer your customers a shopping experience that's more personal, engaging, and authentic:

- Go outside your ordinary style! Host a limited time only pop-up shop location of your normally online brand to build customer loyalty in a promising sales territory—with live music, cookies and cider, to set the mood. Alternatively, open an Etsy shop to sell your retail storefront items online for better geographic spread—with clever product description copy, drool-worthy photos, and a handwritten note and a little something extra free included in all shipments.
- Help customers reach their “season of giving” goals by adding a social impact element to their shopping experience. For example, you could include information about the ethical way you source ingredients or materials, donate a percentage of each sale to a popular local charity, or host a rescue animal adoption and fundraising event in front of your store! Ideas like this help your customers give back to their local communities - and form warm impressions of your business.

**WHO YOU'LL NEED:** Motivate your existing employees to go above and beyond to help you staff an event, set up an online store, and pump a little extra pizzazz into their day-to-day customer interactions! Offering opportunities to employees to help the business make a social impact can strengthen their investment in the success of your business, especially if it's a project that relies upon their normally underutilized talents—or a cause that's close to their heart.

# 4 reasons you'll need extra holiday financing

As far as we know, no one jolly and bearded is going to pop down your chimney to leave a shiny new loan in your stocking—even if your business has been extra nice this year.

It takes a village to compete in the holiday season as a small business - and your Thanks to the rise of marketplace lending, you have much more realistic options for fast and flexible holiday financing—so throw out those expensive, coal-black offers and scribble down your financing wish list. We're here to help.

Here are four reasons you may need an extra injection of holiday financing this year—and why a term loan is your best way forward.

## 1. Inventory—and a place to put it.

Simply put, if you'll need financing to make or purchase enough inventory upfront to meet your projected sales goals throughout the season—then now is the time to act. Depending on your business model, you should budget for warehouse space to store your inventory, or distributors to get your inventory to the right place exactly when you need it—whether that's to one of your retail locations, or directly to a customer's wreathed doorstep.

If you need to increase your bulk, upfront inventory purchases or expand your warehouse space to hold more holiday inventory than last year, a term loan may be an easy way to afford an upgrade! Unlike a merchant cash advance (which usually takes a cut of your sales every day, with daily interest—ouch!), our monthly payments are fixed and low, so you won't feel the impact during your busiest days. And, there are no early repayment penalties if you want to pay off your loan early with your holiday revenue.

**Looking for extra inventory inspiration?**  
Check out our [6 handy tips for managing your holiday workflow](#).



## 2. Technology and equipment.

Small business owners are famous for pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps—but there are two ways to make sure busy season isn't harder than it has to be. First, consider investing in inventory management software. Such systems can help you calculate purchasing predictions, and create barcodes for in-store items that make it easier to track inventory movement and returns (especially those without receipts!).

The best part? Your software will monitor your inventory levels for you—and alert you when popular items are running low, with plenty of time to spare. Such an investment could save you money in the long run, because you won't run out of bestsellers and miss out on lost sales opportunities—or, conversely, buy too much of a certain item and be stuck with discount bin overflow after the holiday season ends.

Second, make your in-store experience as smooth as possible for your employees and customers by ensuring you have the right equipment. What short-term equipment leases could help you accommodate the increase in holiday foot traffic? You may wish to rent additional cash registers, point of sale systems, or mobile credit card readers to keep your lines short and fluid.

A term loan is a stellar option for software investments and equipment rentals, because our Credit team is flexible and doesn't evaluate your business solely based upon your business's current physical collateral ([or lack thereof](#)). Plus, using a Funding Circle loan for extra point-of-sale systems means you won't ever have to fork over daily debits from your boosted credit card sales!

**To learn more** about how to build a smart seasonal hiring strategy, check out our [7 steps to hiring helpful seasonal employees](#).

## 3. Extra hands on (sleigh) deck.

All the technology and software in the world will never replace the people (and skill sets) that help your holiday season come alive—and support the extra in-store workflow that's a welcomed, inevitable part of gift list season. If you want to take your team to the next level this year, consider making some specialized hires to help with more complex investments in your business's success, like marketing, website development, or design.

Carefully measured investments in people smarts on a project basis now can take your holiday sales up the chimney and through the roof—and the positive benefits of a better website or marketing automation program last all year long.





## 4. Seasonal cash flow

Upgraded warehouse space, a better-functioning website, and extra hands on deck: such investments now could really pay off later. The flip side? You might end up with tighter cash flow than usual until slower accounts receivables catch up and your holiday revenues hit the books.

Ultimately, this is a good problem to have—after all, it takes money to make (more) money—but you'll need funds leftover in the meantime while you're weathering post-holiday returns and waiting for your profits to catch up. Having sufficient cash flow to cover your normal day-to-day expenses (like payroll or rent) is critical for your operational success and peace of mind.

Many small business owners tack on a little something extra on their term loan principals to cover such recurring expenses while their bigger investments simmer. When Dorika Beckett, owner of Livewell Home Care Inc. took out her Funding Circle loan, she carved out enough to cover all her bases - and it paid off. "Thanks to Funding Circle's fast and easy process, I've never missed payroll and we're poised to quadruple our revenue this year. For a small business owner, that is huge. That is powerful."

If you want to take your business operations to the next level this year (and stay sane in the meantime), [check your eligibility](#) for a flexible Funding Circle loan today. Our rates start at 5.49 percent—and our Credit team can help you figure out exactly how much financing you'll need to be successful.

There's still time to get the financing  
you need to survive the holidays.

[Check your eligibility](#)

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Applying won't affect your credit score!\*

\*If your business is organized as a general partnership, your credit score may be impacted when you submit your application.



## We hope this guide has been useful!

If you have any questions, please get in touch.

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