

# The 2026 guide to pre-holiday planning



## Why this guide matters more than ever

The 2025 holiday season broke records: online spending hit a first-ever quarter-trillion-dollar milestone, with \$257.8 billion spent between November 1 and December 31—a 6.8% year-over-year jump, according to Adobe Analytics. Yet consumers are also more demanding, more cost-conscious, and more channel-fluid than at any point in history.

Shoppers are starting earlier and expecting more. More than a quarter now begin holiday hunting up to three months in advance, with 12% shopping more than six months ahead (Mastercard Shopper Snapshot, 2025). At the same time, 84% of consumers say they plan to cut back on spending, citing tariffs and cost-of-living pressures (PwC Holiday Outlook, 2025). The message to brands is clear: win on experience when you can't always win on price.

Customer support is no longer a back-office function; it is one of the highest-leverage competitive tools a business has. This guide, updated for 2026, covers what the data tells us about planning your support season, what's changed since 2023, and exactly how to prepare.

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# Why early launching is a competitive advantage during peak seasons

## 1. Stay ahead of a shifting season

The holiday shopping window is no longer a sprint, but rather a marathon. Research from The Trade Desk and Appinio shows that two in five Americans begin researching purchases before Black Friday, with 38% going on to buy in that early window. Meanwhile, PwC's 2025 Holiday Outlook confirms that nearly 80% of holiday gift spending was expected to happen before Cyber Monday. Starting your support ramp-up in October—or even September—is no longer aggressive; it's now the baseline.

There's a real business risk to waiting. Shoppers in 2025 cited tariff-related price anxiety as a driver of earlier purchasing decisions. Brands that weren't ready to handle questions about pricing, availability, and shipping in October left money on the table and customer patience on the floor.

## 2. Take the hassle out of hiring and focus on growth

Filling a role hasn't gotten easier. The average time to fill a position in the U.S. is now 44 days (SHRM, 2025), up from the 36-42 days cited in 2023 guides—and the average cost per hire has reached \$4,700 (SHRM/Playroll, 2025). That figure climbs to \$6,000-\$10,000 for technical or specialist roles. For seasonal support, the math is brutal: by the time a new hire is trained and productive, the peak may already have passed.

Working with an outsourcing partner takes that equation off the table. Preparation time is used for onboarding, knowledge transfer, and test scenarios—not job board postings.

**"Pre-peak season lead time isn't just for training. It's also for agents' on-floor experience and allows management time to adjust to higher agent ratios, resulting in improved quality and higher CSAT."**

Janeille, Delivery Director, Influx

### 3. Maximize your budget—including AI

The economics of customer support shifted materially in 2025. AI now handles roughly 30% of service cases without human intervention, a number Gartner expects to reach 50% by 2027.

For routine holiday inquiries—order tracking, returns, shipping ETAs—well-deployed AI can resolve queries instantly and cheaply. But the setup work takes time: 66% of contact centers that implemented AI took more than six months to see ROI (AmplifAI, 2026).

Start early enough to get that infrastructure right before volume spikes.

### 4. Ensure error prevention and a smooth customer experience

Preparing months ahead gives teams the runway to fine-tune responses, run mock-scenario drills, and build agent confidence before the rush hits.

According to a 2025 Zendesk report, 73% of consumers will stop buying from a brand after multiple bad experiences. With customer switching costs at an all-time low, a fumbled holiday interaction carries outsized long-term cost.

### 5. Protect internal teams from burnout

Agent burnout remains a serious operational risk. A 2025 Salesforce survey found that 56% of customer service representatives report experiencing burnout that directly damages service quality.

And 69% of organizations say agent attrition creates significant operational difficulties. Outside support acts as a pressure valve—keeping internal teams focused, sustainable, and performing at their best.

#### EFFICIENCY UNLEASHED: OUTSOURCING TO BEAT SEASONALITY

Staying ahead of the competition and the holiday surge is simple with a [flexible, full coverage service provider](#). Influx makes it easy to seamlessly scale up your workforce and beat seasonality. And the best part? Affordable, [month-to-month pricing](#). Get started today to keep your customers supported.

# What does the data say?

**\$257.8B**

online holiday spend in 2025, the first-ever quarter-trillion season (Adobe)

**80%**

of routine customer interactions will be fully AI-handled by 2026 (Gartner)

- Consumer loyalty is fragile. 73% of consumers will leave a brand after multiple bad experiences—and 56% leave without complaining (Zendesk, 2025).
- Customer service drives repurchase. Three in four consumers say they will spend more with brands that deliver superior CX (Shep Hyken, 2023/2025).
- Agent context gaps frustrate customers. Six in ten support agents lack sufficient customer context when handling inquiries, leading to customers having to repeat themselves (Zendesk, 2025).
- AI comfort is growing. 69% of consumers are comfortable with brands using AI to handle holiday support messages, rising to 78% for Millennials and Gen Z (Sprout Social, 2025).
- But human backup is non-negotiable. 95% of customer service leaders plan to retain human agents, even as AI handles more volume. Shoppers favor businesses whose AI is 73% managed by humans (NextPhone).
- Agent burnout is at crisis levels. 56% of agents report burnout that harms service quality, and 69% of organizations cite attrition as a major operational challenge (Salesforce/AmplifAI, 2025).
- ROI on AI is real but slow. Companies see an average \$3.50 return for every \$1 invested in AI customer service, but 66% of contact centers took more than six months to see ROI (AmplifAI, 2026).
- Mobile is the dominant channel. 2025 was the first full year mobile accounted for more than 50% of online holiday spend, with a record 56.4% mobile revenue share (Adobe, 2026).

## Top 3 factors impacting good customer service:

**65.2%**

of consumers want to be treated like a valued customer.

**55.3%**

appreciate agents with strong product knowledge or brand expertise.

**53.5%**

of consumers want a fast response.

# How to overcome holiday challenges with proactive solutions

## 1. Rising above the noise—and the algorithm

People now encounter anywhere from 4,000 to 10,000 brand messages per day. In 2025, social media emerged as the number-one or number-two gift discovery channel for Gen Z and Millennials (Sprout Social, 2025).

The 2025 Sprout Social Index found that if a brand doesn't respond on social, consumers simply buy from a competitor.

More than 4 in 10 consumers already use AI tools to help them shop (Mastercard, 2025).

Invest in AI-assisted discovery—gift-finder chatbots, personalized FAQ tools—before the season starts.

### **The solution:**

Create customer experiences that stand out before the discount wars begin. Launching support early gives you time to build genuine connections, not just reactive fixes. Train agents on social-channel response, not just email and phone.

## 2. A fragmented customer journey

Holiday shopping has become radically omnichannel. According to Mastercard's 2025 Shopper Snapshot, 90% of consumers shop in stores during the holidays while 87% of Gen Z browse eCommerce sites simultaneously.

Customers expect seamless transitions between touchpoints, and most contact centers can't deliver: only 7% achieve truly seamless cross-channel transitions (AmplifAI, 2026).

### **The solution:**

Audit your omnichannel handoffs before October. Prepare, review, and optimize every channel—chat, SMS, email, social, in-store—so customers can engage via their preferred method without losing context.

### **TIP:**

Conduct mock holiday scenarios with your support team to simulate an increased workload, then proactively identify any gaps in processes.

## HOLIDAY CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS CONT.

### 3. Seasonal staffing challenges

Forecasting holiday support coverage remains one of the hardest planning problems in operations. You need enough agents to handle volume, but overstaffing in a slow post-holiday January is expensive. In 2025, filling a position took an average of 44 days and cost \$4,700, with no guarantee of quality.

**The solution:**

Use a combination of cross-trained internal staff, flexible outsourcing, and AI-handled Tier-0 queries. The 2026 model is a 'human-in-the-loop' approach: AI handles routing and simple resolution; humans manage complex, emotional, and high-value interactions.

### 5. Post-holiday support influx

Holiday promotions generate a secondary support wave in January: returns, exchanges, gift-card redemptions, and account issues. Companies that scale down too fast after December 25th often lose the loyalty gains they spent the season building.

**The solution:**

Keep a skeleton expanded team through mid-January. Monitor customer feedback, reviews, and social mentions closely. Use post-holiday data to inform your 2027 planning.

### 4. Proactive issue resolution

When 73% of consumers will leave a brand after multiple bad experiences (and over half do so silently), the cost of reactive support is staggering.

It can take three to eight months for a new hire to become fully productive, making last-minute staffing a poor defense against holiday volume spikes.

**The solution:**

Review historical data from previous holiday seasons to anticipate common pain points. Build proactive outreach—shipping delay notifications, returns policy reminders, pre-emptive FAQ updates—into your support calendar.

# A simple checklist to get ahead of the holiday rush

Ready to conquer the holiday season and make it your most successful yet? Natisha, Influx Account Manager of 8 years, crafted a checklist to help you get ahead of the game.

## ✓ Get systems in place to respond quickly

First response time is the #1 impacting factor when it comes to CSAT. Brands that respond to a customer's message within five minutes are [70% more likely to make a sale](#). Ensure 24/7 coverage across every active channel; in 2025, social-media and messaging channels are growing nearly 9% annually as customers favor asynchronous digital engagement (Mordor Intelligence, 2026).

"A support systems audit should be your absolute first step - this will allow faster resolution and that is one of the best things you can give new or existing customers."

## ✓ Set up macros

[Setting up or refreshing help desk macros](#) to answer questions your customers typically ask over the holidays can save time. In 2026, extend this to include AI prompt templates for consistent, on-brand responses.

"The key to macros and AI-generated responses is maintaining your brand and creating real value for your customers."

## ✓ Optimize your website

Mobile revenue now accounts for 56.4% of all online holiday spend. If a site loads longer than 4 seconds on mobile, users begin to abandon—and transactions decrease by 1% for each additional second of load time. [Optimizing your website for the holidays](#) helps you stand out, attract more visitors, improve user experience, and build trust with your audience.

"Connect with your marketing team to optimize your site. Your website performance is essential in ensuring that your online presence aligns with holiday shoppers' unique demands and expectations."

## SIMPLE HOLIDAY RUSH CHECKLIST CONT.

### ✓ Make returns and exchanges simple

Since 74% of consumers have received a gift they didn't love (SurveyMonkey, 2025), your returns process is a key loyalty driver. A [transparent, low-friction policy](#) builds trust and reduces the support burden—complicated processes just create unnecessary ticket volume.

"Keep the efficiency of your support team in mind when creating your returns policy. Lengthy and difficult processes can create unnecessary work."

### ✓ Prepare a plan for unhappy customers

Train agents on soft skills: empathy, de-escalation, and active listening. In 2026, this includes knowing when to take a conversation away from an AI agent and how to do it gracefully. Customers want AI for speed, and humans for empathy—make sure your team can deliver both.

"Unhappy customers want to be heard, and having a plan in place makes those hard conversations a little bit easier."

#### UNWRAPPING THE PERFECT SOLUTION

A well-executed checklist that combines in-house efforts with outsourcing strategies can significantly impact a business's success during the holiday rush.

Here's how Influx keeps outsourced holiday service simple:

- All training and management included
- Operational [flexibility to scale up or down](#) as needed
- On-demand, full coverage support that prevents staff burnout
- Affordable [month-to-month pricing](#)

# Outsourcing for flexible periods vs seasonal hiring

To maximize sales opportunities and meet a higher volume of orders and requests, businesses need additional staff to ensure high-quality support operations and better customer experiences that meet demand.

PROS - OUTSOURCING	PROS - INTERNAL HIRE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiring, onboarding, training, and performance managing are far more cost-effective</li> <li>• AI tools and infrastructure already integrated</li> <li>• Scale up and down capacity</li> <li>• Focus internal teams on strategy and product, not ticket queues</li> <li>• Mitigate compliance risks and security breaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More real-time control over day-to-day team decisions</li> <li>• Direct communication from face-to-face conversations</li> <li>• Control over wages and compensation</li> <li>• Grow your internal workforce &amp; institutional knowledge</li> </ul>
<p>Knowing when to hire and when to outsource is important. Before making a decision, it's crucial to carefully consider your specific business needs and goals and then weigh the pros and cons of each option.</p>	

**"Whether to outsource or hire is always a tough call. In 2026, the AI question is now part of that conversation too—the right partner brings infrastructure you'd otherwise spend months building."**

Toni, HR Director, 2 yrs working at Influx

# Embracing the early launch advantage: the results

Whether you're clearing the backlog or prepping for the holidays, brands of all sizes work with Influx to flex and scale support year-round.




**16,954%**  
growth

## ECOMMERCE

See how Casely partnered with Influx to improve their brand star rating from 3.3 to 4.8 while [growing their business 16,954%](#).

- reduced response time by 9x
- <7 minute average FRT

[Learn more →](#)



**27,000+**  
conversations in one month

## DELIVERY SERVICE

Read how Sendle [scaled 2X in one month for the holidays](#) by partnering with Influx.

- 1 hour response times
- 2x scale up in October
- 27,000+ resolutions in one month

[Learn more →](#)



**15,696%**  
ticket backlog resolution

## MOBILE APP

See how Saturn [got on top of a 15K+ backlog due to seasonal growth](#) by partnering with Influx—scaling from 5 to 22 agents.

- 4x seasonal ticket spikes flex
- 24/7 coverage for SMS and in-app messaging

[Learn more →](#)

# Ready to get started?

Get ahead of seasonality and focus on growth with Influx.

Influx builds full-service support teams that flex and scale monthly, enabling companies to deliver fast, high-quality support experiences, 24/7.

[Let's get started](#) →

#### Sources & Citations

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