



2026 EDITION

Don't go dark this BFCM

The eCommerce BFCM planning guide.
Stay lit, staffed, and steady when it
matters most.

OMNICHANNEL CX

AI + HUMAN

PROACTIVE SUPPORT

POST-PURCHASE

TEAM READINESS

Half a year of revenue in five days

For top eCommerce businesses, the holiday period can account for up to 50% of annual revenue. That concentration is the whole story: the same support setup that runs comfortably in July will find its one weak point on the Friday after Thanksgiving, at 2am, on the channel you check least.

This edition is built from what we see working across hundreds of high-growth brands. It's shorter on theory than most playbooks and longer on the decisions you actually have to make in October, what to automate, what to keep human, how much coverage to buy, and what "ready" looks like a week out.

What's changed since last year

AI stopped being an experiment. Most brands now run some form of automated first touch, which means the 2026 question isn't *whether* to deploy AI, it's whether yours holds up under peak volume with peak-season information.

That's why this edition adds a chapter on managing AI agents alongside human ones, and why the rest of the guide assumes a hybrid team rather than a purely human one.

50%

of annual revenue can land in the holiday window

73%

of shoppers use multiple channels to discover and buy

36–42

days to hire and train a new support agent

Five chapters, one October

01 Omnichannel CX

One conversation, however many channels it crosses.

02 Proactive customer engagement

Answer the question before it becomes a ticket.

03 AI agents that don't go dark **NEW FOR 2026**

Deploying, supervising, and escalating automated support at peak.

04 Post-purchase loyalty

Returns season is a retention channel in disguise.

05 Getting your team ready

Staffing, coverage, and the week-out checklist.

One conversation, however many channels

A shopper asks about sizing on Instagram, follows up by email, and buys on desktop via live chat. To them that's one conversation. To most support stacks it's three tickets, three contexts, and three chances to ask "what was your order number again?"

Repetition is the single most-cited service frustration, 60% of shoppers name it first. During BFCM, when queues are deep and patience is thin, it's also the fastest way to lose a sale you had already won.

THE 2026 SHIFT

Channel count is no longer the interesting number, nearly everyone is on five or six. What separates good from bad is whether context travels with the customer, and whether your automated first touch can hand a conversation to a human without losing it.

Unify every touchpoint

Email, chat, social, SMS, and phone into one queue. Zendesk, Gorgias, and Freshdesk all do this, the work is in the routing rules, not the licence.

Centralise the data

Order history, past tickets, and loyalty status visible on the ticket itself. If an agent has to open a second tab, so will your AI.

Staff to the channel mix

Last year's data tells you where the spike lands. Chat peaks on sale days; email peaks the week after, when the parcels do.

Make self-service findable

70% of customers try to solve it themselves first. Returns policy and order tracking should be two taps from any page, on mobile.

Four numbers worth watching daily

During peak, weekly reporting is too slow to act on. Pick a small set, look at it every morning, and set a threshold that triggers a decision rather than a discussion.

METRIC	WHAT IT TELLS YOU AT PEAK	HEALTHY RANGE
First response time	Whether coverage matches demand, by hour and channel	< 2 min chat < 4 hrs email
CSAT	Which channels are holding quality under load	> 90%
First-contact resolution	Whether context is actually travelling between channels	> 75%
Repeat contact rate	Whether answers are landing the first time	< 12–18%

If first response time is climbing while CSAT holds, you have a capacity problem. If CSAT is falling while response time holds, you have a knowledge problem. They need different fixes, and only one of them can be solved by adding people.

Answer it before it becomes a ticket

Reactive support scales linearly: more orders, more tickets, more agents. Proactive support breaks that line. Every "where's my order?" you answer before it's asked is a contact that never enters the queue on the busiest day of your year.

81% of customers would rather resolve an issue themselves than wait for an agent, and 68% say they're more loyal to brands that reach out first. Getting ahead of demand is both the cheaper option and the one customers prefer.

Proactive shipping updates

Triggered notifications at confirmation, dispatch, and out-for-delivery. SMS for time-sensitive drops. This alone removes the largest single ticket category in December.

A holiday-specific FAQ

Cut-off dates, extended returns, gifting, stock. Write it from last year's top twenty tickets, and point both agents and AI at the same page so answers can't drift apart.

Pre-sale chat at the hesitation point

Trigger chat when a shopper lingers on a product page or stalls at checkout. Sizing and compatibility questions answered in seconds are conversions, not costs.

Catch post-purchase issues early

If a parcel is late or an item is out of stock, say so first and offer an alternative. A delay you volunteer costs goodwill; a delay they discover costs a customer.

AI agents that don't go dark

Automated first touch is now standard, and at BFCM volumes it earns its keep: an AI agent absorbs the repetitive third of your queue instantly, at 3am, in six languages, without a hiring cycle.

The failure mode is subtler than "the bot said something stupid." AI agents drift. Fed unstructured knowledge and left without oversight, they answer November questions with September's shipping cut-offs, confidently, thousands of times before anyone notices. We call it rogue CX AI, and peak season is when it does the most damage.

The rule that holds up at peak

Automate the questions where the answer is a fact your systems already hold. Keep humans on the ones where the answer is a judgement, refunds, damage, anything involving a disappointed gift-giver.

AI HANDLES WELL

- Order status and tracking
- Shipping cut-offs and costs
- Stock and variant availability
- Returns policy and label generation
- Account and address changes

KEEP WITH HUMANS

- Refunds outside policy
- Damaged or missing parcels
- Anything already escalated once
- Bulk, B2B, and VIP orders
- Complaints with a public audience

Four habits that stop AI drifting

An AI agent is not a deployment, it's an operation. These four habits are what separate a bot that quietly deflects a third of your volume from one you end up switching off on Black Friday morning.

01 One source of truth

Structured knowledge with an owner and a date on every article. If your AI is reading a shared drive, it is guessing.

02 A seasonal refresh, not an annual one

Cut-off dates, promo terms, and extended returns change weekly in November. Put a named person on updating them.

03 Humans reviewing AI conversations

Sample AI-resolved tickets the same way you QA agents, 5–10% weekly, scored against your brand standards, feeding back into knowledge.

04 A handoff that keeps context

Escalation should carry the transcript and the order. Make the AI hand over on sentiment and on repeat attempts, not just on keywords.

Track AI containment alongside CSAT, never on its own. Containment rising while CSAT falls means your bot is closing tickets, not resolving them.

Managed AI, with people behind it

Influx manages and optimises both human and AI agents as one team. You don't buy a tool and then staff the gap it leaves, you get a service where automation and people are scoped, trained, and reviewed together.

AI agents, supervised

Deployed on your stack and your knowledge base, with our team owning accuracy, escalation rules, and weekly QA.

Human agents on standby

Pre-trained agents behind the automation, so escalations land with someone who knows your product, not a queue.

Hybrid voice CX

AI handles routine calls and overflow; humans take the conversations where tone decides whether the sale survives.

Follow-the-sun coverage

Teams across time zones mean 24/7 without night shifts, every day of the year, holidays included.

TIMELINE

Week 1

Scope volume, agree coverage hours, connect your tools.

Week 2

Train AI and agents on your macros, tone, and edge cases.

BFCM

Full coverage through peak, scaled back down in December.

Returns season is a retention channel

67% of shoppers read your return policy before they buy, and almost 80% say they'll buy again if returning was easy. Around 30% of online purchases come back, against 8% in store. January is not the cleanup after BFCM; it's the second half of it.

Write the policy for a gift-giver

State the deadline plainly, extend it through January for holiday orders, and be upfront about any fee. Ambiguity here costs you carts before it costs you returns.

Automate the mechanics

A returns platform handling requests, labels, and status updates removes the entire "where's my refund?" category. Manual returns at peak volume is where teams break.

Let customers self-serve

A portal where they choose refund, credit, or exchange, and print a label, is faster for them and cheaper for you than any conversation about it.

Offer the exchange first

Store credit or a swap keeps the revenue and the relationship. "Sorry it didn't work out, here's something closer" converts more often than you'd expect.

Watch refund speed

Refunds inside 5–7 days, return rate by SKU, and repeat purchase rate after a return. That last one tells you whether returns are building loyalty or leaking it.

Get your team ready to excel, not endure

33% of contact centre leaders name burnout and turnover as their biggest peak-season challenge. A stretched team shows up in the numbers long before anyone says anything: handle time creeps, escalations rise, quality slips.

The fix is planning, and it has a lead time. Hiring and training a new agent takes 36 to 42 days, which means the decision about November capacity is an early-October decision at the latest.

Forecast, then staff

Model volume by day and channel from last year, adjusted for growth and your promo calendar. Staff to the peak hour, not the daily average.

Cross-train for flex

Agents who can move between chat, email, and social let you rebalance in an hour instead of a week.

Rotate shifts deliberately

Nobody should hold the hardest shift every day. Publish the rota early and protect time off inside the peak window.

Buy burst coverage

If the forecast beats your capacity, outsource the surge rather than overloading the core team. Month-to-month, so you scale back in December.

Watch average handle time, first response time, escalation rate, and how your team says they're doing. The first three tell you when the fourth is about to become a problem.

What ready actually looks like

Seven days out, everything below should be true. Anything still open is a decision, not a task, escalate it rather than hoping it resolves itself over the weekend.

COVERAGE

- Rota published through Cyber Monday
- Overnight and weekend hours named
- Surge capacity confirmed in writing
- On-call escalation path agreed

AI

- Retrained on current knowledge
- Escalation triggers tested end to end
- Daily QA sample scheduled
- Kill switch and owner identified

KNOWLEDGE

- Holiday FAQ live and linked
- Shipping cut-offs dated and correct
- Promo terms and exclusions written
- Macros updated for peak scenarios

POST-PURCHASE

- Extended returns window announced
- Shipping notifications firing correctly
- Returns portal load-tested
- Refund SLA agreed with finance

One more: agree now what you'll do if volume doubles your forecast. Deciding that in advance is the difference between a hard weekend and a dark one.

CONCLUSION

The gap is easier to close in October

Preparing for peak isn't only inventory and promotions. It's making sure that the experience holds from the first pre-sale question to the January exchange, across every channel, at every hour, whether the first reply comes from a person or an AI agent working on their behalf.

Everything in this guide has a lead time. Knowledge takes a week to structure. Agents take six weeks to hire. AI takes a fortnight to train properly and a season to supervise well. None of it can be bought on the Wednesday before.

Do the planning now and BFCM stops being the weekend you survive. It becomes the one that proves what your brand is like to deal with, which is the thing customers remember long after the lights come down.

Three things to do this week

- 1 Pull last year's volume by day and channel, and mark the peak hour.
- 2 List your top twenty tickets and mark each one automate, human, or self-serve.
- 3 Compare the forecast to your real capacity and decide who covers the difference.

NEED MORE CAPACITY?

Launch a support team in one week

Pre-trained human agents and supervised AI agents, working as one team on your tools. 24/7, month-to-month, scaled up for peak and back down after.

[Talk to us about BFCM →](#)