

viewpoints



The Q4 Playbook
– **inside the minds**
of international
e-commerce experts

oban
international

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About Oban International

Oban International is an award-winning digital marketing agency that helps businesses grow across international markets. Since 2002, we've combined digital expertise with local insight, using our network of LIMEs (Local In-Market Experts) to understand the details that really shape behaviour – from search habits to language quirks. We turn that knowledge into campaigns that perform across organic search and paid media – not just adapted for local markets but built to succeed in them.

Contributors

These are the people behind the insights.

Drawing on experience with brands from challengers to category leaders across 50+ markets and multiple channels, and on our global network of Local In-Market Experts (LIMEs), they turn hands-on campaign experience into practical guidance you can use.



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How Q4 unfolds around the world

United States & North America

- **Halloween:**
31 October (costumes, food, home décor, gifting)
- **Thanksgiving:**
4th Thursday in November in the US;
2nd Monday in October in Canada
- **Black Friday:**
Day after US Thanksgiving (late November)
- **Cyber Monday:**
Monday after Black Friday
- **Christmas:**
25 December
- **Post-Christmas / Boxing Day-style sales:**
Late December



“In Canada, our Thanksgiving Holiday comes a month or more before the US one, so a lot of our “Black Friday” and “Cyber Monday” sales start in October.”

– Caroline, Canadian LIME

How Q4 unfolds around the world

Plan smarter with Oban's Global Marketing Calendar

Our free Global Marketing Calendar is your guide to key retail dates and marketing opportunities worldwide.

Featuring 140+ events hand-picked by our Local In-Market Experts, it's available as an interactive calendar or printable PDF. Packed with local insights, it helps you plan effectively, reach new markets, and make confident decisions. Access the calendar at obaninternational.com/global-marketing-calendar



United Kingdom & Europe

- **Halloween:**
31 October
- **Singles' Day (growing in Europe):**
11 November
- **Black Friday:**
Late November
- **Cyber Monday:**
Late November / early December
- **Christmas / Advent shopping period:**
November–December
- **Boxing Day:**
26 December (major sales event)
- **January Sales:**
Extend Q4 performance impact



"In China, Singles' Day is now called Double 11. The 'Singles' Day' label was dropped because being single no longer carries negative connotations, and the festival is now inclusive of everyone."

– Yue, Chinese LIME

China & APAC

- **Singles' Day (Double 11):**
11 November (largest global shopping event)
- **Double 12 (12.12 Festival):**
12 December
- **Mid-Autumn Festival:**
Sometimes falls in Q4 depending on lunar calendar
- **Christmas (urban, gifting-driven):**
25 December (not a public holiday but commercially important in Tier 1 cities)



“In the Middle East, Black Friday is called White Friday. The word ‘black’ can carry negative or unlucky connotations in local culture, so retailers changed the name to make the event feel positive and welcoming. The focus remains on big discounts and major shopping, but the rebranding makes it culturally relevant and inclusive.”

– Yousef, UAE LIME



Global (Cross-market trends)

- **Singles’ Day (11/11):**
Biggest single-day ecommerce event globally
- **Black Friday / Cyber Week:**
Increasingly globalised
- **Cyber Monday:**
Strong in US, expanding worldwide
- **Christmas peak:**
Universal demand driver across most markets

Latin America

- **Black Friday:**
Major retail event (Brazil especially)
- **Singles’ Day:**
Increasingly adopted (11 November)
- **Christmas:**
25 December (peak gifting season)
- **New Year sales:**
Late December to early January

India

- **Diwali (Deepavali):**
October or November
(major e-commerce peak)
- **Big Billion Days / festive sales (Flipkart, Amazon):**
Around Diwali
- **Black Friday:**
Growing but less dominant
- **Christmas / New Year sales:**
End of December

The Context

Setting the scene

This guide brings together first-hand perspectives from across Oban International on how e-commerce brands can succeed in Q4. These observations come from live client work across multiple markets and reflect what's happening right now in international digital marketing.

Our goal is simple: to show the real patterns. Across clients, markets, and platforms, some trends are obvious; others are less so. Together, they reveal how the landscape is shifting and what high-performing brands do differently. This isn't a traditional 'best practice' guide. Those change fast, and last year's tactics don't always apply today. Instead, we focus on the patterns we see repeated across our work.

Why this matters now

It's a cliché, but the marketing landscape really has changed. It's faster, more automated, and more fragmented. Platforms evolve constantly, AI is reshaping teams, and customers move between touchpoints in ways that are harder to track.

The result is more noise.

That is especially true in Q4, the most commercially important period for most e-commerce brands. Demand peaks differently across markets; around Black Friday and Christmas in some, and local holidays and retail calendars in others.

With more tools, formats, and solutions competing for your attention, it's easy to get distracted by what's new and lose sight of what really drives performance. That tension runs throughout this guide.

Generative AI driven traffic to retail sites increased by **693%** in 2025 versus the previous year, showing how AI is reshaping discovery and research.

Source: Adobe

What's changing in 2026

Discovery now happens earlier and across more channels. People pick up ideas from social platforms, AI tools, and comparison sites before narrowing their options, making the early journey more important than ever.

AI is also changing evaluation. Users rely on summaries, comparisons, and recommendations, so products that are unclear or hard to understand risk being overlooked.

Competition is rising. Paid media costs are higher, and visibility alone is no longer enough. Creative quality, positioning, and clarity matter as much as reach.

Customer expectations have never been higher. Faster delivery, better content, and smoother experiences are the baseline, and anything unclear or slow will be ignored.

These pressures are not entirely new, but in 2026, they are stronger and converging like never before.

What we're seeing across markets

From our work with international brands, several patterns emerge:

- **First-party data matters more than ever**, but many brands struggle to use it effectively
- **Creative quality and volume are critical**, as platforms demand more from advertisers
- **Paid and organic channels are linked**, with performance in one affecting the other
- **Search and social are blending**, with people discovering, researching, and comparing across both
- **Marketing and operations are connected**, since stock, fulfilment, and UX directly affect results
- **AI helps workflows**, but does not replace human judgment
- **Customers are more cautious and informed**, comparing options and expecting fast, clear, and smooth experiences

Success is cumulative. It depends on systems working, data being used well, creative hitting the mark, teams aligned, and timing on your side. When those pieces click, results follow.



“French consumers exhibit deep loyalty once they discover a site of true quality. Because their online purchasing journey often begins with a natural sense of distrust, they would much rather remain with a proven, reliable partner than risk the uncertainty of an unknown platform.”

– Johann, French LIME

How to read this guide

These insights come from Oban practitioners in different specialisms. The chapters each explore a key aspect of modern marketing:

- **The Signals** – what smart brands notice early
- **The Levers** – what actually drives performance
- **The Multipliers** – what scales success
- **The Illusions** – what looks good but is misleading
- **The Safeguards** – how to protect and sustain performance
- **The Long Game** – what endures beyond Q4
- **The Next Step** – where to go from here

If you're responsible for Q4 performance, use this guide to reflect on what's working and what isn't, and take from it what's useful. The brands that succeed in Q4 are already hard at work – **so let's get started.**



The Signals

What smart brands notice early

The strongest Q4s begin long before the quarter itself. By the time demand spikes, the outcome is often already set. The best brands spot early shifts and act on them, shaping demand across platforms, content, and conversation before the first click.

That early advantage depends on how well brands use their data. Many still overlook first-party data, even though simple, reliable approaches grounded in operations and customer experience tend to hold up best under pressure. The most effective teams look beyond clicks and conversions, tracking signals like engagement, search trends, social conversations, and AI-driven recommendations, then using multi-touch attribution to connect them back to real business results.



OLIVER SMITH,
ACCOUNT DIRECTOR

“If you’re only showing up at the point of search, you’re already fighting for scraps.”

Much of the customer journey now happens before anyone visits your site. People move between TikTok, Google, AI tools, and reviews, forming opinions and narrowing their choices along the way. By the time they arrive, they have usually already decided what they want. Your site is only one part of this journey, and success depends on reaching and influencing people across the channels they encounter first.

TikTok illustrates this clearly. Demand forms, grows, and sometimes converts entirely on the platform, without any direct involvement from brands. Other platforms do the same, from marketplaces like Amazon and Zalando to short-form video and user-generated content hubs. Viral trends such as #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt show how quickly influence spreads and how little visibility brands can have.

So the real signal isn’t traffic or conversions, but what people search for before they are ready to buy, how their interest in brands develops, where they compare options, and which products are recommended publicly before purchase. Showing up in these moments is critical. If you miss them, you’re really fighting for what’s left over.

GEORGE GAVIN, ORGANIC STRATEGIST



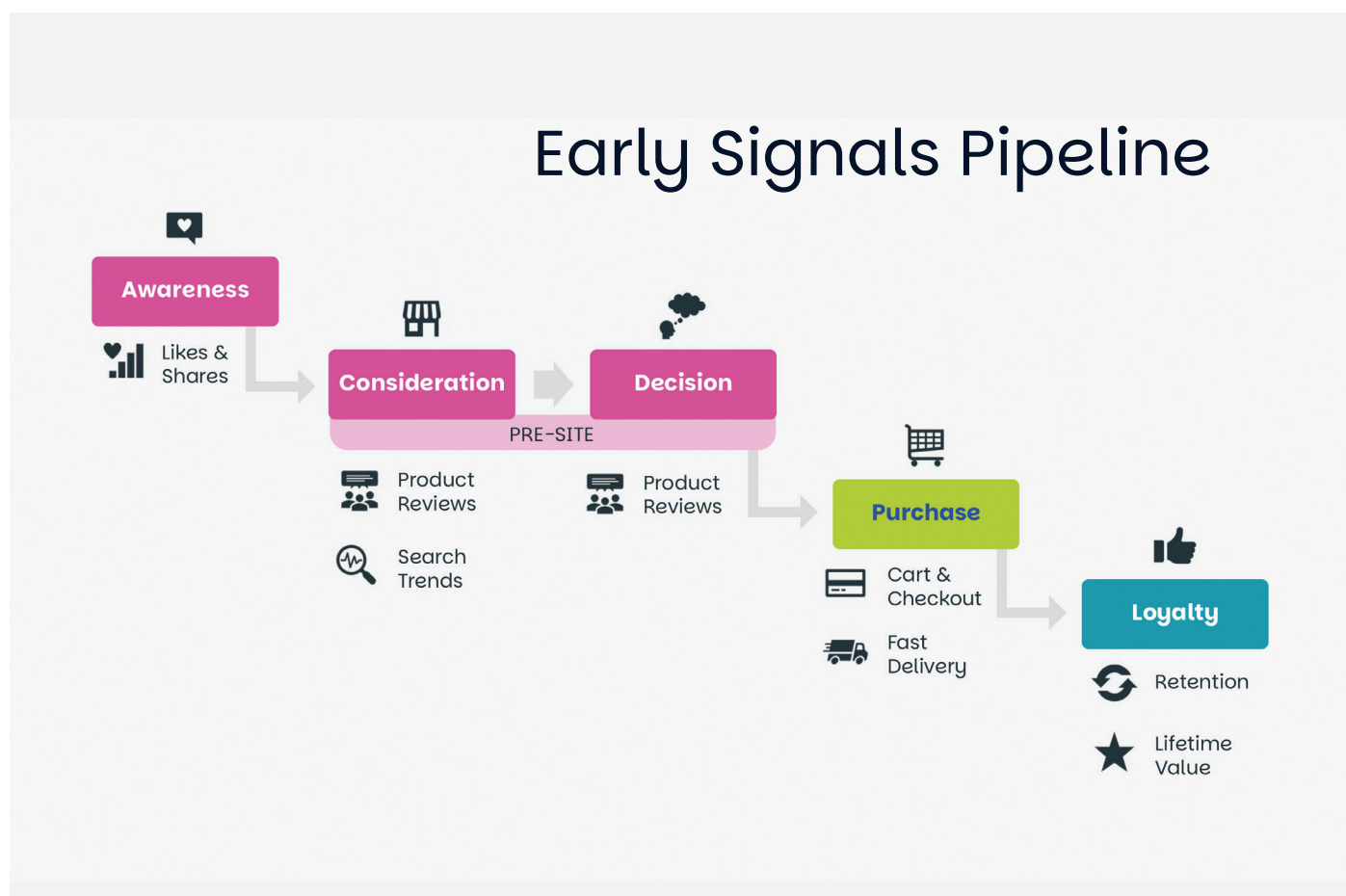
“Good SEO today is about being noticed everywhere, not just on traditional search results.”

In SEO, the work doesn't start when someone types a query into Google. As Oliver says, by then, many decisions have already been influenced elsewhere, through AI tools, comparison sites, marketplaces, and content platforms that shape opinions long before search happens.

The question is whether you appear in all the places that matter earlier in the journey. That means that SEO goes well beyond keywords and positions. It means making your products and content clear, structured and credible enough to be picked up across multiple systems.

Comparison content is a good example. Many brands feel nervous about mentioning their competitors, but if you don't define your place in the market, someone else will do it for you, often somewhere you can't control.

'Visibility' has a different meaning from a few years ago. People can see, compare, and decide on your products without clicking through to your site, which means that traffic alone won't tell the full story. The real measure is whether you are part of the consideration set and influencing decisions early.



LULU LAKE, PAID MEDIA STRATEGIST

“Most brands don’t run out of demand. They run out of time to build it.”



Some brands treat Q4 like a switch. Spend ramps up, pressure rises, and everyone scrambles to capture what’s already there. But by then, it’s often too late.

The strongest brands don’t just react, because they’ve been building demand for months, investing in the upper funnel, creating audiences, and establishing familiarity long before the market gets crowded. At peak, you’re not competing on product, but on who showed up first.

Relying on demand capture alone means entering the most expensive, crowded part of the market. You compete for the same users as everyone else, costs are high, efficiency drops, and margins shrink. It becomes a race that’s hard to win. Not all demand is valuable. Some converts quickly but doesn’t deliver margin or long-term value. Successful brands grasp this early. They’re clear on where volume matters, where margin matters more, and where it’s worth investing ahead of immediate returns. That clarity can turn a good Q4 into an exceptional one.

The same applies to first-party data. Most brands have it, but few use it properly. The ones that do shape audiences earlier, refine messaging faster, and enter Q4 with a clear view of where the real value sits.

Overly complicated plans can hinder you. Clarity wins under pressure. The best teams focus on what moves the needle and deliberately ignore what doesn’t, even if it looks good on paper.



SUZIE OAKFORD, MANAGING DIRECTOR

“Your website isn’t where decisions happen anymore.”

As both Oliver and George have said, by the time someone reaches your website, they’ve usually done the hard part. They’ve compared options, read reviews, maybe asked an AI tool for advice. They arrive with a point of view.

They’re using your website less to decide what to buy and more to validate their choice, or walk away if the experience isn’t clear. Not all brands have fully adjusted. Their focus is still on driving more traffic, when a better question is what that traffic actually looks like. The signal isn’t volume but intent. Are visitors ready to buy, or still deciding? That changes what your site needs to do.

When intent is high, the goal is simple: get out of the way. Make delivery clear, payments easy, and the journey obvious. Any friction or doubt gives people a reason to leave and complete their purchase elsewhere.

Add in international markets, and it becomes more complicated. Behaviour varies across regions. Trust, expectations, and perceptions of value differ. That creates a tension many brands underestimate. You want global consistency, but you also need local relevance. You have to decide what to standardise and what to adapt.

This is where local insight matters. It’s about knowing why people do what they do, not just seeing what they do.



Over half of **online holiday spend** came from mobile devices in 2025.

Source: Adobe

SUSIE COX, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

“Sometimes the biggest problem isn’t demand. It’s that you can’t fulfil it.”



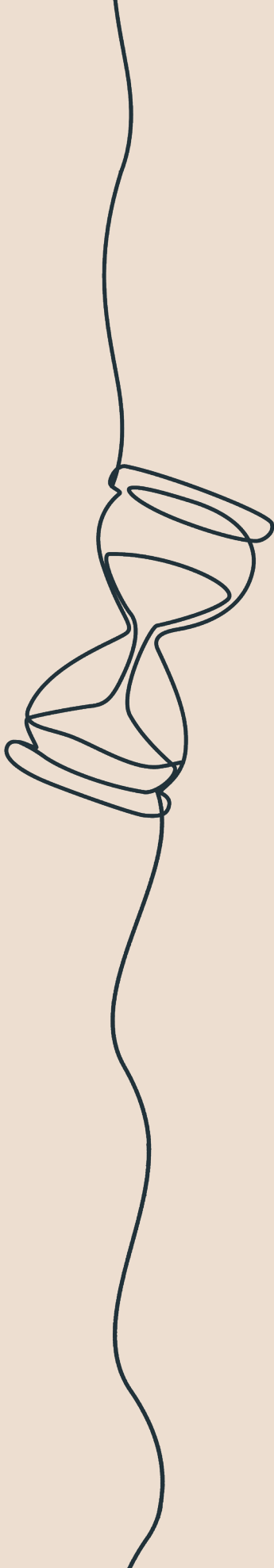
One of the most overlooked signals in Q4 is what happens behind the scenes. You can drive all the demand you want, but if you can’t fulfil it profitably, things can start to fall apart.

We see it all the time. A product takes off, demand spikes, and suddenly it’s out of stock. Delivery slips, customer service is stretched. From the outside, it looks like success, but internally it’s under strain. At that point, it’s no longer a marketing problem and has become a business constraint.

Strong brands don’t wait for that moment. They know their capacity, costs, and limits, including discounting, shipping, and duties. They’ve already defined what sustainable growth looks like.

With the phrase ‘cost of living’ having become grimly familiar, customer expectations have shifted. People want certainty. Clear pricing, sensible bundles, helpful gift guides, and options like Buy Now, Pay Later show how people want to manage cost and risk, not just serve as features.

It’s a mistake to treat these as last-minute fixes because in fact, they’re early indicators of behaviour. If you notice them early, they guide your strategy. If you ignore them, they become friction you must deal with later.



What this means for e-commerce brands

- **The journey starts earlier than you think.**
If you're only measuring what happens on-site, you're missing where decisions are now formed.
- **Demand is shaped, not just captured.**
The real advantage comes from showing up early, not spending harder at the end.
- **Not all demand is equal.**
Decide early where you prioritise margin, volume, or long-term value. You can't maximise all three.
- **Your data should drive your decisions.**
First-party data is one of the clearest signals you have. Use it to guide where you push and where you hold back.
- **Operations set the ceiling.**
Stock, fulfilment, and service capacity define how far performance can go.
- **Intent matters more than traffic.**
If users arrive ready to act, your job is to get out of their way.
- **Visibility now extends beyond your site.**
If you're not present in AI tools, comparison environments, and social discovery, you're missing key moments of influence.
- **Global scale comes with trade-offs.**
You can't win everywhere equally. The earlier you decide where to focus, the stronger your Q4 will be.
- **Economic context matters.**
Cost-of-living pressures shape behaviour. Adapt pricing, bundles, and messaging to reduce friction and build trust.

The Levers

What actually
drives performance

What works - and what doesn't - is revealed in Q4. Some things matter more than others, so the key is focusing on areas that drive performance: data, creative, media, and experience. If these aren't working together, your impact will be undermined. The question is simple: which levers really matter, and are they ready?

It's easy to pile on channels, tactics, and complexity, but it's worth stopping to ask how much the basics have really changed. Good website experience, clear messaging, reliable data, and understanding your audience – these still make the biggest difference.

Clearly, what has changed is the environment. People are more informed, compare more, question more, and expect more. Your content and experience need to work harder to earn trust.

Again, local context is crucial. Assuming UK or US norms apply everywhere often backfires, which is why you need on-the-ground insight from your target markets.

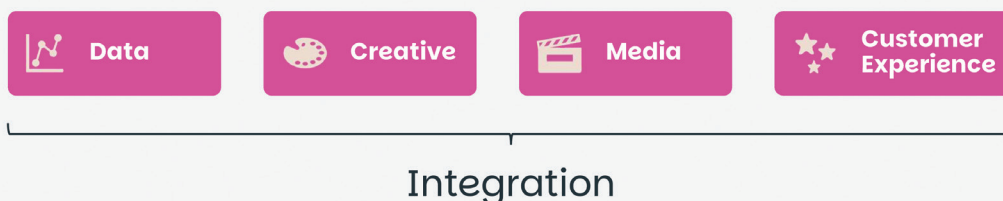
Paid and organic channels are most effective when they support each other. Misalignment doesn't just waste effort but can leave gaps in your strategy and cost real performance.

Flexibility matters. Costs change, consumer behaviour shifts, and markets move quickly. A good strategy can adjust to change without losing sight of what matters most.



SUZIE OAKFORD,
MANAGING DIRECTOR

***“The fundamentals
still matter more
than anything else.”***



JULES BODOULÉ SOSSO,
STRATEGY DIRECTOR AND PAID MEDIA LEAD

“Your system is only as strong as the data behind it.”



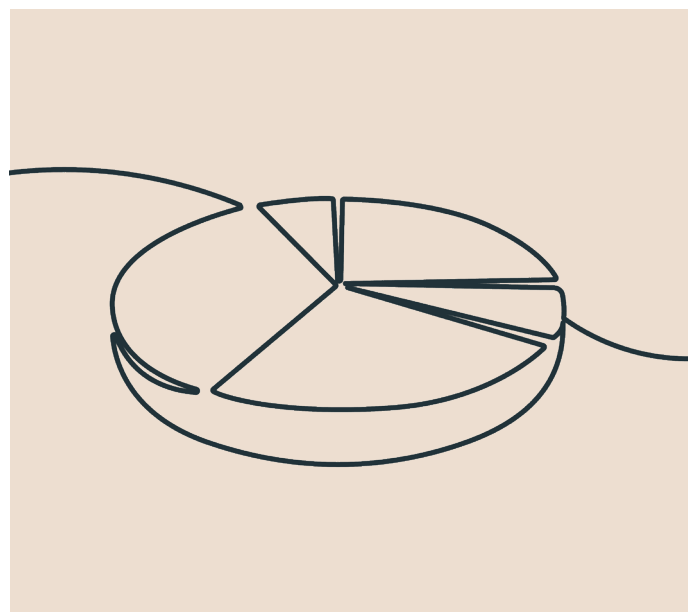
Performance doesn't live in the platform, but in the data you feed it. If your CRM, tracking, and conversion signals aren't connected, your media is working with gaps, and optimisation suffers.

Feed and product data are critical. Titles, attributes, pricing, and stock need to be optimised. Updates should be near real-time, and custom labels help prioritise high-margin or high-stock SKUs. Weak inputs just scale noise.

Channels need to work together, since paid and organic reinforce each other. Search, social, and marketplaces all shape the same journey. Alignment improves performance, misalignment wastes effort.

Given how search has changed, you need visibility across SERP features, AI-driven results, and brand protection, while selectively targeting high-intent, more generic and competitor queries.

Simplicity is important. Even complex, tailored campaigns perform best when the underlying systems are reliable and easy to manage under pressure.



CHARLIE THORNTON, ORGANIC LEAD

“Feeds now drive discovery, not just ads.”

Google Merchant Centre isn't just about paid ads anymore. Feeds are becoming part of your organic presence, because they affect how your products show up in search, shopping, and even AI-driven interfaces. So it's important to think of feeds strategically, not just as a tool for paid media.

Essentially, Google is taking more control over how product information gets out there. They're making it easier for retailers to push structured product data straight into Google's system, which then powers AI discovery. Everything's starting to link together – payments, search, product discovery – to become (in theory!) one smooth experience.

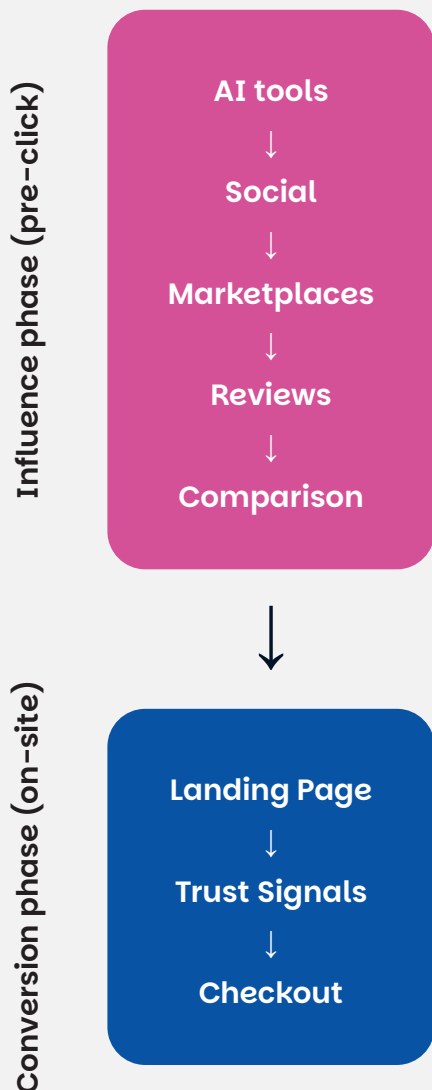
Today, people can make very precise and detailed search queries, and AI can guide them from discovery to purchase. Product feeds play a crucial role in that journey.



LULU LAKE,
PAID MEDIA STRATEGIST

“What works in Q4 is usually what’s been working all along.”

A customer journey before the click



There’s always a lot of noise around new ideas in paid media. New formats, new placements, and new automation features that promise to unlock performance if you just switch them on.

But when the pressure’s on, often it pays to tune out the noise and stick to what you know works. That doesn’t mean being dull. It means being selective and knowing where to focus and where not to.

We see a real divide between demand generation and demand capture. Some brands lean too heavily on capture in Q4 because that is where the short-term results sit. The problem is, if you haven’t been building demand earlier in the year, you’re just competing harder for the same people at the same time as everyone else.

Balance is important: you need enough activity earlier on to create demand, and enough focus later to convert it efficiently. Ignore one and the other starts to fail.

Scaling is another area where things go wrong. Just because demand increases doesn’t mean you should increase spend in a straight line. Brands that do this can end up buying inefficient growth. Scaling should feel deliberate. It should follow signals, not impulse. If it doesn’t, you’re just paying more for the same outcome.

And to repeat: too many brands treat first-party data as something to report on rather than something to act on. Brands that use it properly understand their audience better, target more precisely, and make smarter creative decisions. Without that, you’re essentially guessing. And guessing is an expensive Q4 strategy!

Online retail spending in the UK rose
8.4% year-on-year in Q4 2025.

Source: Office for National Statistics

SUSIE COX, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

“Creative is often the difference between average and stand-out performance.”



Creative is a crucial lever. The same audience and budget can deliver very different results depending on the creative, which is why testing matters. High-performing brands iterate constantly, trying different angles, formats, and tones. In Q4, depending on your brand, you probably need a mix of both emotional and rational messaging. Some people want inspiration; others want clarity and reassurance.

Consistency is also important. Pacing spend, maintaining presence, and avoiding stop-start activity builds momentum, while erratic campaigns give erratic results.

The point about operations bears repeating: even the best campaigns can falter without adequate stock, fulfilment, and service capacity.

On-site experience is crucial. Landing pages should match the campaign promise, delivery information must be clear for each region, and checkout should be simple with local payment options and transparent pricing.

Trust signals make a big difference. Reviews, local proof points, and clear reassurances reduce friction and encourage purchases.

CRM ties it all together. Segmented flows for early access, cart recovery, and post-purchase engagement capture more value from the demand you've generated. They work best when timed to match your promotions, rather than used as general automated messages.



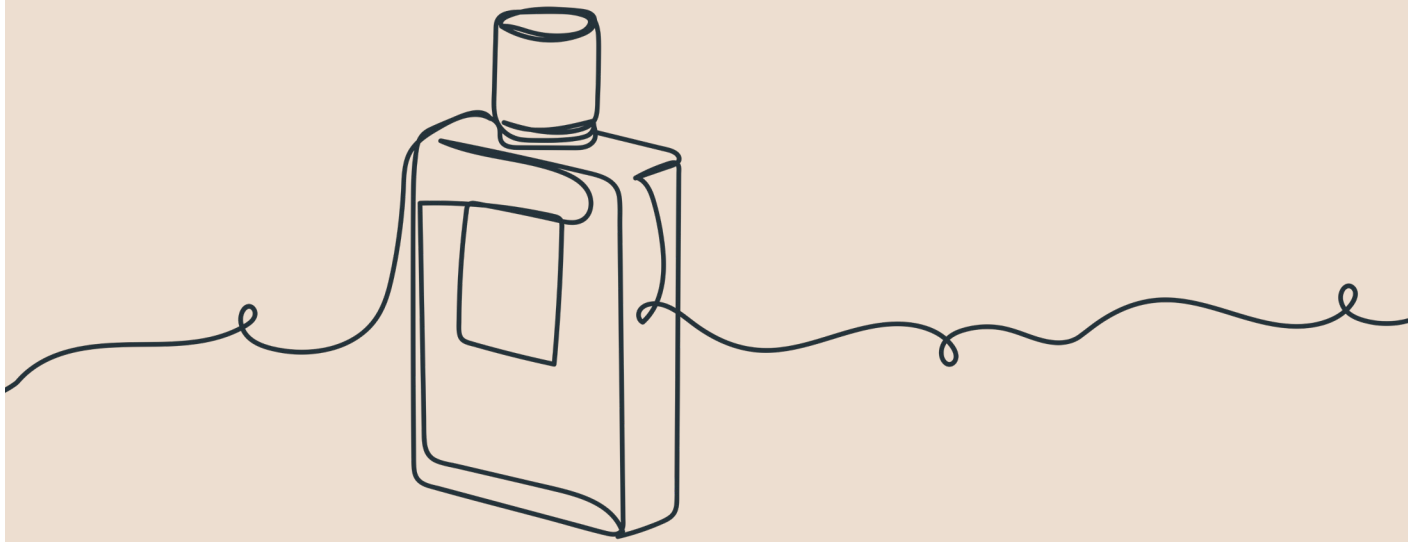
CHARLOTTE DEACON, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

“Delivery can make or break the sale.”

Delivery is a key part of someone's decision to buy. Customers now expect a choice of options as standard, including premium slots like named day or time. If those options aren't there, a sizeable number will drop out. We've seen data that suggests around a third have abandoned a purchase for this reason.

It varies by brand, sector and market, but many customers care more about convenience than the lowest price. They'll pay for delivery that fits their plans, but they expect it to be reliable. When it isn't, the cost is more than one lost order, because it puts future purchases at risk too.

So treat delivery as part of the offer, not the final step. Show options early, not just at checkout. Offer a clear range, including a premium choice. Most importantly, deliver on what you promise. This is where brands protect conversion now and earn repeat business after peak.



ERIK, LOCAL IN-MARKET EXPERT (U.S.)

“You can’t control the cost of the market, but you can control how well you convert.”

Costs in the US are just higher. Competition is intense, audiences are bigger but more crowded, and ad platforms price clicks based on demand. More brands are chasing the same shoppers, especially around peak seasons, so the cost to reach them rises. You can’t optimise it away, it’s just how the market works.

But that doesn’t mean you can’t compete. With a strong conversion rate, you can absorb those costs and still perform well. The focus should be on getting more from the traffic you already have, not chasing cheaper clicks.

Timing is key. If you’re not preparing for Q4 early, you’re already behind. Momentum in the US builds fast, and by peak season, competition is fierce. Brands need to position themselves early, build demand ahead of time, and execute when it counts.

Case Study

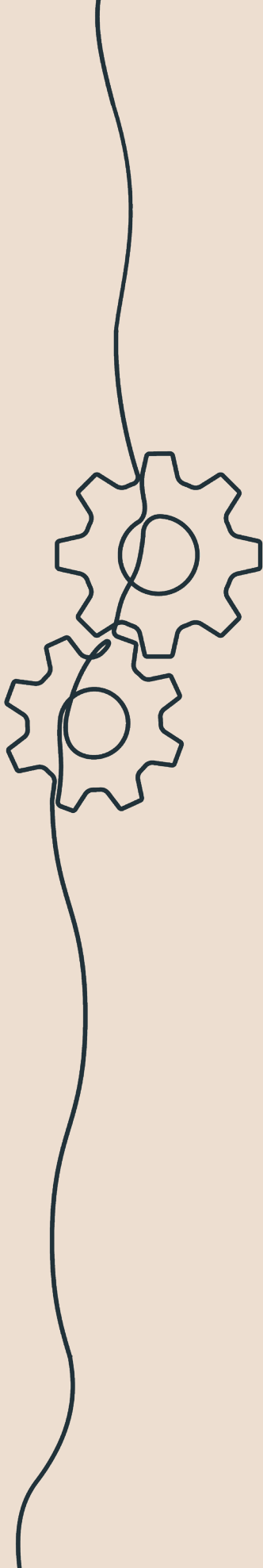
How timing and focus turned Black Friday into £100k extra revenue

ROJA London is a luxury perfume house where demand is strong but highly sensitive to timing and confidence, particularly in Q4.

On Black Friday, the focus was on efficiency and return across Search and Meta. Instead of chasing reach, the emphasis was on conversion and profitability.

With disciplined targeting and a focus on high-intent demand, the campaign delivered a 246% year-on-year increase in ROAS, reaching 3.9 on Google Ads and generating £100,000 in revenue above target.

It shows what happens when the right levers are prioritised at the right time.



What this means for e-commerce brands

- **Focus on the levers that will deliver the most impact.**
Prioritise what truly drives performance: data, creative, UX, and integration.
- **Get your data and systems right first.**
Clean, connected feeds and CRM signals are the foundation. Without them, even the best campaigns underperform.
- **Treat creative as a core performance driver.** Test constantly, iterate fast, and balance emotional and rational messaging to maximise impact.
- **Balance demand generation and capture.**
Early activity builds the audience you can convert efficiently when peak season hits.
- **Align marketing with operations.**
Stock, fulfilment, and logistics are part of performance and define how far your campaigns can go. Make delivery part of the offer, with clear options shown early and a reliable service behind them, as this directly affects conversion and repeat purchase.
- **Use trust signals.**
As well as clear delivery information, reviews, local proof points, and simple checkout all reduce friction and convert high-intent traffic.
- **Invest in consistency, not just scale.**
Regular, sustained presence beats erratic bursts of spend.
- **Build flexibility into your strategy.**
Markets shift quickly, so the ability to adapt without losing focus is a competitive advantage.
- **Localise your approach.**
Behaviour, expectations, and cost structures differ by market. On-the-ground insight improves relevance and results.
- **Think beyond ads.**
Structured product data and feeds now shape discovery, search, and AI-driven purchase journeys.
- **Prioritise conversion over cost.**
You can't always control acquisition costs, but you can control how efficiently you turn traffic into results.

The Multipliers

What scales success

At some point in Q4, small tweaks can stop making much difference. You can keep adjusting ads, pages, and targeting, but results start to level off. The real gains come from strategies that amplify everything you are already doing across channels and touchpoints. They don't always show up in reports, but they often decide whether performance keeps growing or stalls.

Most brands have more data than they use. The challenge isn't access but how the data is organised and applied. Fragmented data just ends up as reports. Connected data becomes a real decision-making tool, and that's when impact starts to multiply.

Clean, joined-up data doesn't just improve targeting. It feeds into creative, search, and on-site experience. It shapes what you say, who you say it to, and how you show up across platforms.

It also makes cross-channel planning possible. Paid search, social, SEO, CRM, and affiliates should all work toward the same commercial priorities. Budgets shouldn't be fixed by channel but should shift in real time to what's delivering the best return.

Expansion into new markets needs the same thinking. The best markets are where demand is forming, logistics work, and margins can hold under pressure. Copy-paste approaches are usually underwhelming because each market needs its own messaging, promotions, and channel mix.

Used properly, data ties all of this together. Used poorly, you end up working harder for less.



SUZIE OAKFORD,
MANAGING DIRECTOR

“Most brands aren’t short on data. They’re short on using it well.”

CHARLIE THORNTON, ORGANIC LEAD

“If your product data can’t answer the question, you don’t get picked.”



Product data is critical. It needs to be clear, structured, and detailed enough to work across search, shopping, and AI systems. It’s about adding context: what the product is for and when someone would use it.

Search behaviour is becoming more specific. People now ask longer, more detailed questions, similar to the way they would speak out loud. For example, instead of “running shoes”, someone might search for “running shoes for flat feet for long-distance training with good arch support under £130”. If your product data doesn’t reflect that level of detail, you’re less likely to show up.

This is where structured data makes a real difference. A well-built feed improves visibility across Google, marketplaces, and AI tools at the same time, while also supporting how campaigns scale on each platform.

Each channel plays a different role. Marketplaces like Amazon help capture demand and increase visibility. Owned channels drive margin and build the brand. Social platforms vary by market, with some leaning into TikTok, others into Meta or local platforms. The key is making sure these channels work together, not in isolation.

AI influenced **20%** of US Christmas retail sales in 2025 – a signal that new discovery pathways are reshaping the journey.

Source: PracticalEcommerce



OLIVER SMITH, ACCOUNT DIRECTOR

“Creative only works when you test enough to see patterns.”



Creative is one of the biggest multipliers in paid media, yet a surprising number of brands treat it as an afterthought. The truth is, testing more gives you more. Running thirty creatives instead of three teaches you what works across audiences, platforms, and stages. That's where the real value lies.

The best creative is clear, adaptable, and authentic. Storytelling really matters, which is why founder-led content, simple propositions, and a touch of personality often outperform polished but soulless campaigns. Creative also has to be built for scale. Each platform demands its own approach, so the goal is not uniform assets but adaptable ideas that translate effectively across environments.



LULU LAKE, PAID MEDIA STRATEGIST

“Channels don't scale in isolation.”

Paid media works best when channels work together. Search, social, affiliates, and CRM should all support the same priorities, not run in separate lanes.

Budgets need to be flexible. Instead of fixed allocations, spend should shift to where it's delivering the most return. If one channel is outperforming, it should receive more investment in the moment.

Automation can help, but only when it's used with oversight. AI bidding and optimisation can scale performance, but without good creative and solid data, you're just scaling mistakes. Think of AI as a powerful tool, not a replacement for strategy.

Partnerships and affiliates also play a role. Strategic publishers or influencers can boost reach at key moments, acting as multipliers alongside your core activity.

The real magic happens when everything is integrated. Channels, audiences, and signals need to align. When they do, they reinforce each other. When they don't, you waste effort.

SUSIE COX, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR



“Discounts don’t sell themselves – your stock, fulfilment, and timing do.”

Your offer setup has a big impact. Clear and well-structured offers work better than generic discounts. You need to think about customer intent and stock at the same time. For products in high demand but with limited availability, highlight the scarcity. For slower-moving stock, consider bundling or creating gift sets to move it without hurting margins.

Location matters too. Stock in one warehouse may not be available everywhere, so your offers should reflect that. Timing is important, since early buyers, last-minute shoppers, and holiday gift hunters all respond to different approaches, so your promotions should speak to each group.

TikTok Shop can drive meaningful conversions, but results depend on your brand, sector, strategy, and audience. It’s not overhyped, but it doesn’t benefit every brand equally.

Performance

Product data quality

Search discoverability
& visibility

Creative testing
& volume

Cross-channel integration
(Paid + Organic)

Offer
architecture

Trust

Operations & fulfilment +
market planning



CHARLOTTE DEACON, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

“Trust compounds, and without it, nothing scales.”

Trust has a big impact. Without it, nothing moves. With it, everything becomes easier. It starts with the basics: make sure product information is clear, pricing is honest, reviews are visible, and your site is easy to use.

Trust matters even before someone reaches your site. When people compare search results, browse marketplaces, or check AI recommendations, the brand they choose is often the one they already trust. Recognition and familiarity strengthen your marketing because people are more likely to click, engage, and convert when they’ve seen your brand before. That makes every channel work harder.

And the benefits of trust compound over time. The more you earn it, the more effective your marketing becomes. It lifts conversions, keeps customers coming back, and strengthens everything else you do.

What this means for e-commerce brands

- **Build and structure your data properly.**
It underpins targeting, creative, and measurement, and enables cross-channel orchestration.
- **Use data across the business.**
Break down silos so decisions are driven by a single, connected view.
- **Treat product data as a strategic asset.**
It drives visibility across search, marketplaces, and AI systems.
- **Increase creative volume and testing.**
More variation leads to stronger insights and better performance.
- **Integrate paid and organic strategies.**
Channels should reinforce each other, not compete.
- **Scale based on marginal return.**
Budget should move towards what is working, not stay fixed by channel.
- **Build offers that match intent and capacity.**
Use tiers, bundles, and structured promotions instead of relying on blanket discounting.
- **Use automation with oversight.**
AI can scale performance, but only when guided by strong inputs and strategy.
- **Invest in trust.**
It compounds over time and improves performance across every channel.
- **Approach markets with intent.**
Prioritise where demand, logistics, and margins align, and adapt to each market rather than copying and pasting.



The Illusions

What looks good but is misleading

Q4 is full of activity that can feel like progress. Metrics go up, dashboards look good, reports seem positive. But the signals that look strongest may not always be reliable. They can encourage the wrong behaviour, giving false confidence in strategies that erode long-term performance. The real skill is knowing what to ignore.

A big Q4 illusion is thinking that short-term revenue equals success. Sales spike and reports look strong, but much of that uplift comes from seasonality and heavy discounting rather than real growth. Judging performance only in December can be misleading, because January often reveals whether results were sustainable or just pulled forward. Discounting drives volume fast but erodes margins over time and teaches customers to wait for the next offer. What looks like demand is often just shifted timing.

Traffic is another trap. With AI changing how people search and discover, trying to 'recover' lost clicks can waste effort. What matters is being visible at the moments when decisions are made, not just counting clicks. Attribution can add even more confusion. Paid search and branded campaigns may appear to drive results, but they are often capturing demand created elsewhere. Platform reporting can exaggerate this, especially with automated campaigns over-claiming conversions.

Video remains a critical channel, particularly on YouTube, but only when it aligns with strategy and customer intent. Producing content just for visibility rarely delivers meaningful impact. Despite all the hype, brand discovery is still largely search-driven, so for smaller budgets, the focus should be on capturing and converting demand before investing heavily in reach.



SUZIE OAKFORD,
MANAGING DIRECTOR

“Q4 revenue can look like growth when it’s really just timing.”



JULES BODOULÉ SOSSO,
STRATEGY DIRECTOR AND PAID MEDIA LEAD



“Scale can hide inefficiency.”

An illusion in performance marketing is thinking that growth equals success. In Q4, it's easy to pour in spend as demand rises and watch revenue climb, but that uplift can hide shrinking margins from heavy discounting and rising costs. Just because you're growing doesn't mean you're efficient or sustainable.

Brands can grow quickly when budgets allow, but real success comes from profitable growth. Staying disciplined and scaling with control ensures performance isn't diluted, particularly when data or targeting could be stronger. ROAS can look fantastic when harvesting existing demand, but it reveals little about incrementality or long-term value. You may feel efficient while missing the real opportunities.

Automation isn't a magic wand. AI can speed things up, but it only works if the foundations are strong. Bad data, weak signals, or unclear goals won't be fixed by AI – they just get amplified. And Q4 results can be tricky to read. Complex systems can make it feel like you're in control, but without regular testing, adjustments, and active management, the market will set the pace for you.

Brands and consumers are pulled in multiple directions by new platforms, tools, and trends, making strategic focus difficult and early planning essential. Organic traffic growth is constrained by zero-click searches and evolving SERPs. KPIs need rethinking, since the priority is no longer reclaiming lost traffic, but sustaining it under these conditions.

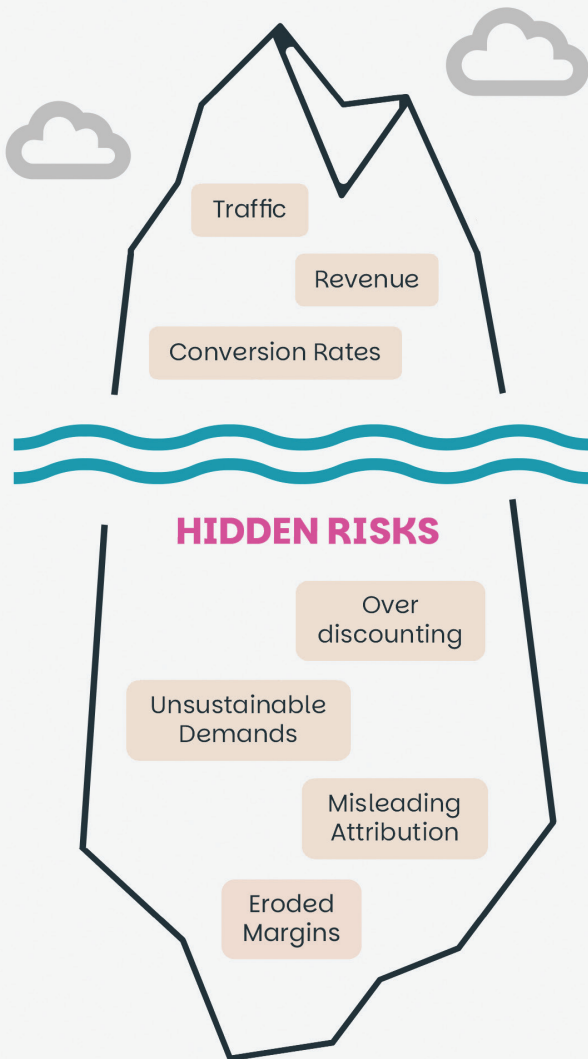


GEORGE GAVIN,
ORGANIC STRATEGIST

“Traffic is no longer the whole story.”

In Q4, flat traffic can feel like failure, but that's not necessarily the case. AI-driven search, comparison sites, and off-site platforms are shaping decisions long before anyone clicks. Your brand might be appearing in AI answers or product comparisons, influencing buyers without showing up in dashboards. People are searching for answers – for example, “best waterproof running jacket under £150” or “Brand A vs Brand B winter coat” – and if your content isn't there, they'll choose someone else without you even knowing. You can't rely on traffic alone to tell the full story.





OLIVER SMITH,
ACCOUNT DIRECTOR

“Q4 can make weak strategies look like wins.”

Conversion rates often rise in Q4, but that can be a little misleading. Much of the increase comes from people who already know your brand or are close to buying. Customer acquisition costs may look better too, but that's usually because it's easier to convert demand at this time of year, not because your strategy has suddenly improved. Email and CRM often do well for the same reason – they're reaching people who already know you. The danger is giving these results too much credit and forgetting the work needed for earlier-stage acquisition.

Discounts can boost short-term sales but overusing them can pull purchases forward and eat into margins. Customers may even start waiting for the next offer. Messaging that highlights value while addressing customer concerns helps maintain trust and long-term performance. Viral trends can create quick bursts of interest, but they rarely last. Platforms like TikTok can drive attention fast, but the effect fades without a clear and consistent strategy behind it.

SUSIE COX, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

“Creative aesthetics are not the same as creative performance.”



Luxury brands rightly care about how things look, but aesthetics on their own don't drive performance. Creative needs to be useful as well as visually strong.

In Q4, people are looking for clarity and reassurance, as well as inspiration. That's why things like gift guides or price-led messaging often outperform purely visual campaigns. The mistake is assuming that if it looks good, it will work. That's not always the case.

Brands should tread carefully with AI-generated content. It's often seen as a quick way to save time and cost, but the reality is less straightforward. Once you factor in human review, editing, and quality control, the efficiency gains are smaller than expected.

AI can help with scale, but it still needs human input to make it feel right for your brand and your audience. Without that, content can feel generic. People can tell, and when they do, trust drops and performance follows.

The same goes for social. High views, likes, and shares can look like momentum, but attention isn't the same as intent. You can have strong engagement and still see little commercial impact if it's not converting. The trap is confusing visibility with effectiveness.



In the 2025 holiday season, AI referrals converted **31%** better than other sources, suggesting influence sits outside standard analytics.

Source: Fashionista



What this means for e-commerce brands

- **Don't mistake Q4 uplift for real progress.**
Higher conversion rates, lower CAC, and rising revenue often reflect seasonal demand. What matters is whether it's profitable and sustainable.
- **Look beyond last-click performance.**
Channels that appear to drive results may just be capturing demand created elsewhere. Question attribution and sense-check platform data.
- **Measure influence, not just clicks.**
Visibility across AI, search features, and off-site environments matters more than ever, even if it's harder to track.
- **Don't overvalue engaged audiences.**
Strong CRM and social performance often reflect existing demand, not new growth. Keep feeding the pipeline.
- **Treat testing as essential.**
If you're not consistently testing creative, messaging, and formats, you're not really learning or improving.
- **Prioritise useful creative.**
Q4 content should help people decide. Clarity and reassurance often outperform pure aesthetics, even for luxury brands.
- **Use AI with judgement.**
It can help scale, but without human input, it risks generic output that weakens trust and performance.
- **Be careful with discounting.**
It can drive short-term volume but often erodes margin and shifts demand rather than creating it.

The Safeguards

How to protect
and sustain performance

In a high-pressure environment like Q4, it's easy to optimise for speed over stability. Campaigns are launched faster, budgets increase, and decisions are made quickly. That pace can drive results in the short term, but it also introduces risk. Safeguards keep performance consistent when everything else is moving. They're the systems, checks, and habits that prevent small issues from becoming major problems. Growing quickly is one thing; staying in control is another.



SUZIE OAKFORD, MANAGING DIRECTOR

“Consistency is more valuable than intensity.”

AI is still experimental, and it's worth being honest about that before you scale it. It can do a lot, but it doesn't automatically know what 'good' looks like for your brand. Without clear guardrails in place, both tone and messaging can drift, and the experience starts to feel inconsistent. In Q4, that can become expensive very quickly.

In Q4, brands are usually doing more, and it's important to stay consistent while everything ramps up. If your messaging, data, and experience aren't aligned, you create friction.

And that friction shows up in small moments.

Someone hesitates on a product page, questions a promotion, or doesn't fully trust what they're seeing. That's often enough to lose the sale.

Consistency is what holds it together. Messaging needs to be consistent in your ads, on your site, and across markets. Customers don't see separate channels; they see one brand. If it feels disjointed, they notice, and that costs you money.

So AI is both useful and risky. It can help you move faster and do more, but only if you already know what 'right' looks like. Otherwise, you're scaling inconsistency.

Consistency also applies to how your brand shows up across channels and partners. Without oversight, it's easy to drift into the wrong environments or overexpose your message. Over time, that erodes trust. Strong safeguards make sure your brand appears in the right places, in the right way, at the right frequency.

Again, flexibility in budget allocation is important. Being able to shift resources in response to emerging conditions allows brands to optimise Q4 results rather than sticking to rigid plans.

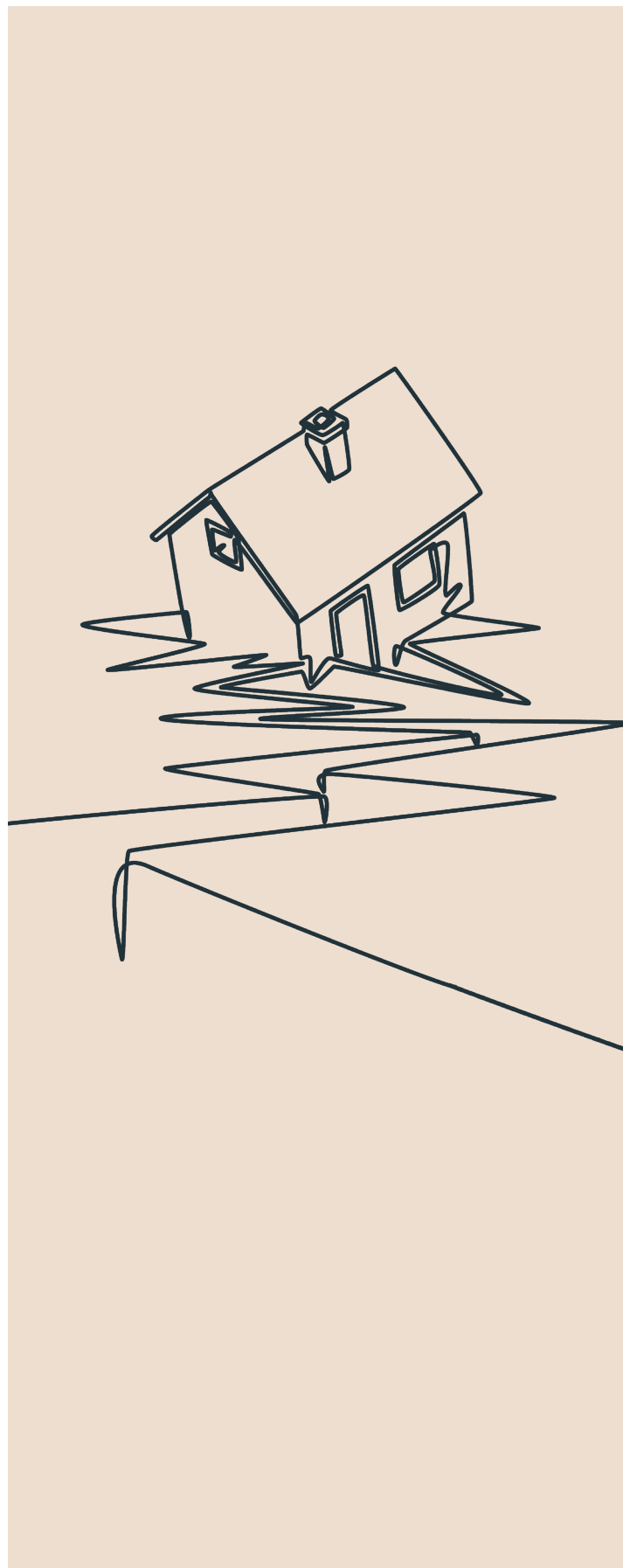


CHARLIE THORNTON,
ORGANIC LEAD

“If your foundations are weak, everything else falls over.”

Technical SEO is still the foundation. As search becomes more complex with AI answers and structured results, clean, accessible, well-organised data matters more than ever. If search engines can't understand your site, they can't use it. Technical issues often hide in plain sight, blocking visibility and performance. That's why regular audits are essential. SEO safeguards are simply about keeping your site discoverable, accessible, and understandable.

Content quality is another safeguard. Thin or duplicated content weakens authority. As AI-generated content increases, quality becomes a key differentiator. Your content must be accurate, relevant, and useful; and editorial discipline is the best way to ensure it.



JULES BODOULÉ SOSSO, STRATEGY DIRECTOR AND PAID MEDIA LEAD

“Safeguards shouldn’t slow you down; they should save you money.”



Safeguards aren’t there to slow you down. Instead, they should enable you to grow safely and at scale. International marketing is rarely simple. Laws, platform rules, and cultural expectations differ from market to market. Without clear safeguards, that complexity can hold you back.

Legal and marketing teams often see things differently. Legal focuses on risk, marketing on opportunity. Both are right, but if they don’t align, decisions can become overly cautious or progress can stall. In practice, platforms often allow more latitude than legal teams expect. Shared understanding, not just sign-off, closes the gap.

When legal and marketing work together, safeguards stop feeling like a blocker. They give teams confidence to move faster, test more, and scale without losing control. This matters even more over time. Regulations change, platforms evolve, and flexible safeguards today make it easier to adapt tomorrow.

In an AI world, trust is a challenge. Content is easier to produce, but also easier to question. People are more aware of synthetic content and sceptical of it. Transparency matters, because if something feels artificial, trust drops.

That doesn’t mean avoiding AI. It means using it carefully. Brands need clarity on where and how it’s used, especially in customer-facing content. Quality, tone, and authenticity matter. AI should support your voice, not replace it.

LULU LAKE, PAID MEDIA STRATEGIST



“Monitoring protects performance from drift.”

Campaigns rarely fail all at once. Instead, they can drift. In paid media, costs creep up, conversion rates slip, and nothing seems urgent enough to fix. By the time it’s obvious, ground is already lost.

Safeguards stop that drift from taking place. Regular monitoring catches issues early, whether that’s audience overlap, creative fatigue, or budget leaks. In Q4, consistency matters, but repeating the same message too often can wear thin.

Good safeguards keep things fresh. Simple controls like creative rotation, frequency limits, and structured testing make campaigns more effective. Monitoring shouldn’t focus only on platform metrics. Keep an eye on contribution margin in real time, not just revenue or ROAS, to protect both performance and profit. Setting clear rules for discounts and bids helps prevent short-term gains from hurting long-term results.

Global e-commerce conversion rates tend to be modest. Typical conversion benchmarks in late 2025–26 range between about **2.5%** and **3.2%** globally, revealing how much competition and friction still exist.

Source: SQ Magazine



SUZIE OAKFORD,
MANAGING DIRECTOR

“Creative governance prevents inconsistency.”

Creative drives performance, but without clear guidelines, it can end up inconsistent across channels and teams, weakening your message. Good creative governance keeps your work on brand and on track. It shouldn't limit creativity, but it should give it direction.

Rules around tone, messaging, and visual style allow teams to produce work that's varied yet consistent, which delivers the best results. Testing is part of this, but unstructured tests give unreliable insights.

A clear framework makes sure what you learn is useful.

The same applies to measurement. You can't just take platform data at face value. Check it regularly against backend revenue and analytics, especially during peak periods. Without this, you risk making decisions based on incomplete or misleading data.

Inconsistent branding

Delivery delays

Slow communication

Poor customer experience

No post-purchase support

Confusing tone of voice



SUSIE COX,
CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

***“In Q4, a tiny slip
in experience
can feel huge to
your customers.”***

Customer experience is especially important in Q4. Paid media can bring in traffic, but even small problems can hurt results. Communication is key. If stock runs out, deliveries are delayed, or warehouses are busy, act early and be clear. Proactive updates keep customers informed, reduce frustration, and protect trust.

Small details make a difference. Accurate stock messages, delivery estimates, and confirmation emails help reduce uncertainty, which is a common reason for drop-offs in Q4. Safeguards are not just about preventing problems, but also about responding effectively. Contingency plans and clear escalation paths allow teams to act quickly and stop issues from spreading.

Customer experience does not end at checkout. Transparent timelines, clear returns, proactive updates, and strong post-purchase support build confidence and encourage repeat business.

CHARLOTTE DEACON, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

**“Mistakes can win you trust
if you handle them well.”**



As Susie says, customers pay attention to how you deal with problems, not just when everything goes smoothly. Clear pricing, accurate product details, and honest messaging matter, but reviews and testimonials give people confidence when they need to make a quick decision.

The real test is when things go wrong. Fixing issues quickly and making customers feel heard can strengthen the relationship and make them more likely to come back. Mistakes can be a chance to show that you're reliable.





“In France, the term “Soldes” (sales) is strictly regulated and can only be used a few times a year, to prevent unfair competition between large retailers and smaller shops. Because the official windows are so limited, they are highly strategic. While some companies increasingly work around these rules with daily promotions or clearance sales (“déstockage”), the official Soldes remain a distinct and eagerly anticipated event for French consumers.”

– Johann, French LIME



GEORGE GAVIN,
ORGANIC STRATEGIST

“**Markets aren’t interchangeable.**”

Culture, behaviour, and expectations all shape how people respond. If you don’t adapt your strategy to different countries, you risk getting it wrong.

Localisation matters for messaging, pricing, and how you position your product. Tone is a simple example, since a direct style might land in one market, while a softer approach works better somewhere else. Without that nuance, you can easily put people off.

The safeguard is to work with Local In-Market Experts, test approaches in each market, and adjust your approach based on real local insight.



What this means for e-commerce brands

- **Build consistency across all touchpoints.**
Align messaging, data, and experience so customers see one seamless brand, even under Q4 pressure.
- **Invest in technical and content quality.**
Clean SEO and accurate, relevant content protect visibility and authority while AI-assisted content requires careful oversight.
- **Monitor performance continuously.**
Catch drift, creative fatigue, or budget leaks early before they erode results or profitability.
- **Create structured frameworks for creative and testing.**
Clear rules on tone, messaging, and rotation make insights reliable and campaigns effective.
- **Align operations with demand.**
Ensure stock, fulfilment, and service can handle peak activity to prevent small issue from cascading.
- **Use tools and AI with clear guardrails.**
Let technology scale work without sacrificing quality, tone, or brand consistency.
- **Close gaps between markets and rules.**
Work with Local In-Market Experts, test market-specific approaches, and adapt to culture, regulations, and platform expectations.
- **Treat safeguards as a proactive part of strategy.**
They stop problems before they spread and make growth safe, scalable, and flexible over time.

The Long Game

What endures beyond Q4

Q4 is intense. Everything accelerates, demand spikes, and weaknesses are exposed. It's tempting to treat it as the year's make-or-break moment, but what matters as well is what comes afterwards. Successful brands focus on sustaining momentum, using Q4 as a springboard for long-term growth.



SUZIE OAKFORD, MANAGING DIRECTOR

“Q4 can look like success, but the real question is what happens next.”

In Q4, revenue spikes, traffic surges, and conversions jump. But if that lift comes only from seasonal demand, it disappears just as fast. The danger is trying to chase the same peak every year instead of building on what's already there.

To perform over time, brands need to invest steadily all year. That way, they enter peak season strongly and can use Q4 insights to improve the business, not just fill a report. Turning seasonal customers into long-term value means segmenting new versus returning buyers, creating tailored post-purchase journeys, and running early retention campaigns to encourage a second purchase. The payoff is both a stronger quarter and a more consistent year.

Brands that clearly demonstrate expertise within their niche tend to perform better in search. Understanding whether people are looking to learn or buy can be the difference between being noticed or ignored.

Retention is cheaper and more profitable than acquisition.

It costs 5×–25× more to acquire a new customer than to retain an existing one. Existing customers are 60–70% likely to buy again, compared with 5–20% for new visitors.

Source: ecomrankd

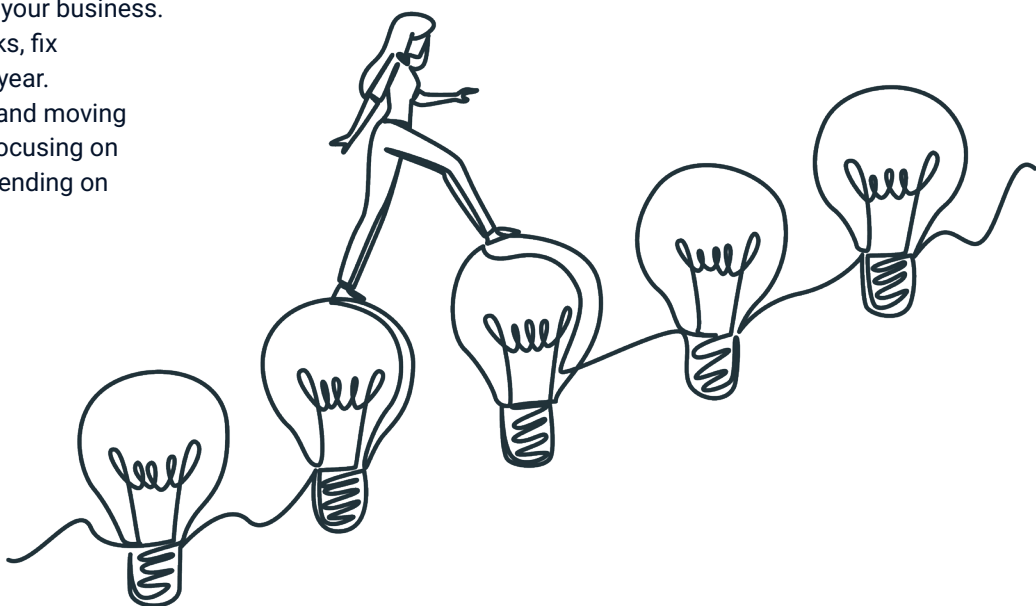
OLIVER SMITH, ACCOUNT DIRECTOR

“Treat Q4 as a moment to learn, not just sell.”



Q4 is valuable because it shows how your business performs under pressure – what works, what breaks, and where luck plays a part. It's tempting to rush through, report the results, and move on. A better approach is to pause and look closely at what happened: where customers dropped off, which assumptions didn't hold, and which channels or messages outperformed.

Q4 provides a concentrated view of your business. Brands can use it to learn what works, fix problems, and improve for the next year. January is about recovering profits and moving from urgent, short-term actions to focusing on value and standing out, without depending on big discounts.



GEORGE GAVIN, ORGANIC STRATEGIST

“Keep going after Q4 to win the next cycle.”

After Q4, some brands slow down. Budgets tighten, activity drops, and attention moves to the next short-term push. But SEO doesn't work that way. Authority takes time to build, content needs to be created and indexed, and technical issues need to be fixed. Brands that keep going after Q4 gain an advantage while others pause.

The post-Q4 period is when you plant seeds. Fix gaps, publish content that missed the peak, and build a foundation for the next cycle. Inventory and merchandising also matter. Move excess stock carefully, protect your brand value, and approach January sales with a plan instead of reacting. Good SEO requires a long-term approach.

On-site, guiding users through clear journeys is essential. Chatbots and predictive UX help the right users convert efficiently. You attract fewer but more relevant visitors by matching content to their real questions and intent. The basics matter. Technical SEO, crawlability, and site structure are all important, and AI optimisation only works when the foundations are solid.

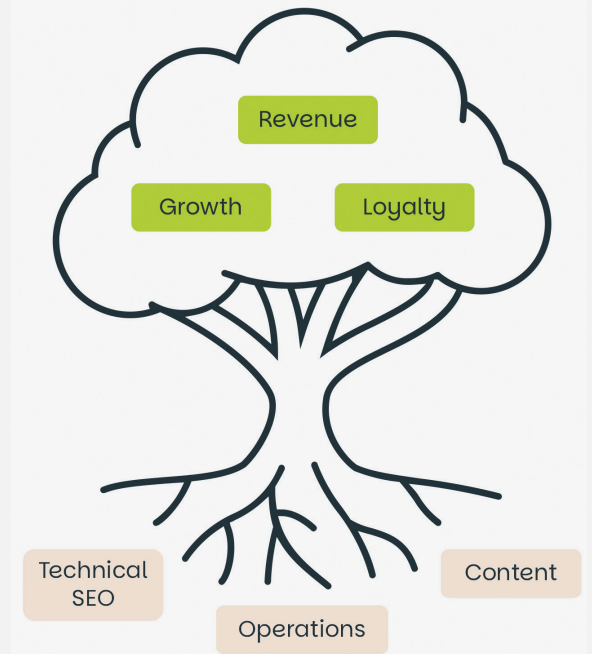
And often, being a second mover can help, because jumping on trends too early can waste investment. Before making big changes to your site, work with your SEO team to ensure updates meet user needs and are easy for AI to find.



CHARLIE THORNTON,
ORGANIC LEAD

“Your product data could make or break the year.”

Q4 puts your systems under pressure, but once the rush is over, your product data is what keeps you ahead. Make your catalogue easy to update and easy to find on every platform. Clear details, context, and attributes help AI and search tools understand not just what you sell, but why customers would want it. Brands that keep their data flexible and ready for new formats or trends stay visible, relevant, and competitive long after the holiday spike.



LULU LAKE, PAID MEDIA STRATEGIST



“Paid media becomes more valuable when the learning compounds.”

Short-term wins are easy to spot, but real advantage comes from steady improvement over time. Small, consistent drops in acquisition cost matter more than a one-off spike. Testing audiences and creative regularly helps you figure out what works and why, with each test informing the next.

This only pays off if testing happens all year, not just during the busy season. Over time, you build a clear picture of what works, who responds, and which channels drive lasting value. Keep an eye on the data, focus on profitable markets, and use what you learn to plan smarter for next year.



SUSIE COX, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

“Acquisition gets you attention. Retention is what makes it worthwhile.”



Q4 often focuses on new customer acquisition, but that's just the start. Without follow-up, brands have to start over each year, which is costly and unsustainable. Retention builds relationships, improves margins, and creates predictable performance through email, CRM, and loyalty programmes. Customers who feel understood are more likely to come back.

Use the data from Q4 to strengthen CRM, grow loyalty programmes, and encourage referrals. Upgrading platforms and capabilities is also important. Invest in first-party data, AI and automation, and international infrastructure such as payments, logistics, and localisation.

CHARLOTTE DEACON, CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTOR

“Peak performance comes from understanding behaviour.”



Plan around behaviour, not channels. Look at where people are paying attention, what matters to them, and whether they trust your brand. The goal is to shape decisions, not just get eyeballs.

AI tools can make things faster, but rising costs and softer clicks mean human judgement, smart targeting, and a mix of channels are still essential. Creative and media should be planned together, with room to test, adapt, and respond as behaviour shifts during peak periods.



JULES BODOULÉ SOSSO,
STRATEGY DIRECTOR AND PAID MEDIA LEAD

“Peak season isn’t a reason to ignore sustainability.”

Sustainability is an important consideration in retail, but it’s not the primary driver of second-hand growth. Take Vinted, now France’s largest fashion retailer by sales volume. Its appeal is as much about access as ethics, giving shoppers a way to buy premium for less in a tougher economic climate. For many, affordability outweighs sustainability. Among 35–55s, 46% cite price as their main motivation for buying second-hand, compared to 38% for sustainability (Business of Fashion x McKinsey, The State of Fashion 2026).

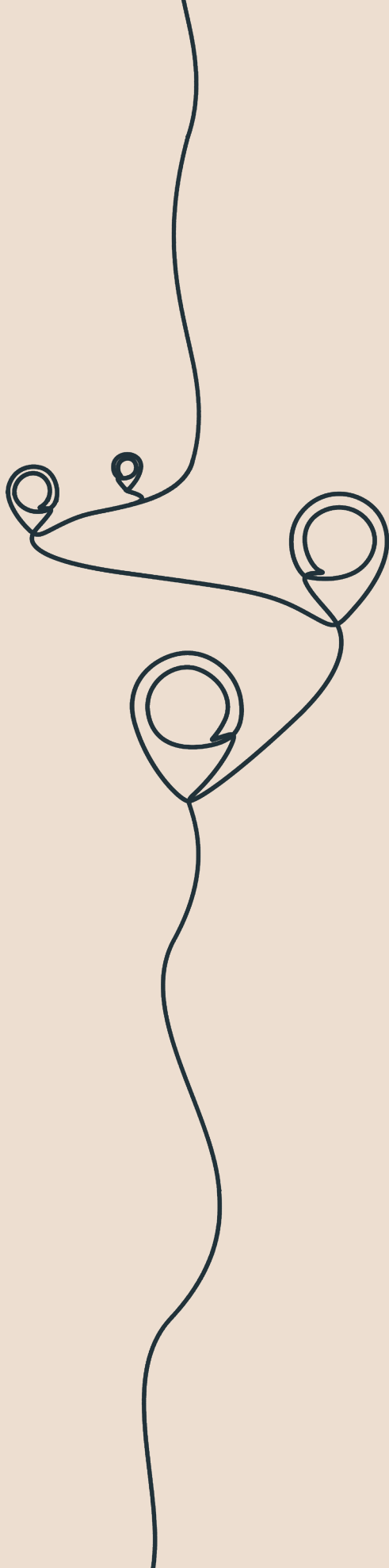
A strong strategy goes beyond messaging. Resale marketplaces, trade-in programmes, or certified pre-owned stock need to be clear and compelling. Increasingly, this is about having a defined resell strategy, with models like resale-as-a-service making it easier to participate. Packaging, inventory, and returns should support the experience. Brands that get this right in Q4 can attract loyal buyers, encourage repeat business, and turn holiday shoppers into long-term advocates.

Paid media has evolved fast. Around 2015, it was about granular manual control. By 2020, machine learning automation dominated. Today, AI-driven systems make complex decisions at scale. Understanding these shifts is essential for campaigns that last beyond Q4. Budgets may need to rise just to maintain performance, so peak season is the perfect time to test scalable allocations and see what drives long-term ROI.

Within search, the main engine is becoming a multimodal information tool, with richer, faster experiences. Lessons from China, where ‘power apps’ – mini-programmes inside apps that let people browse, compare, and buy without leaving the platform – dominate, show what’s possible. Investment in search and large language models is huge, but it has to pay off. Ads are the obvious lever, but content and websites still matter, even as their role shifts.

Marketers need to ask hard questions. What happens when traffic stops being the main measure of success for search and content? What if rising Q4 CPCs, driven by competition, limited ad inventory, economic inflation, and AI bidding strategies, make maintaining performance more costly? To plan effectively for the future, brands need to confront these trends and rethink long-held assumptions.





What this means for e-commerce brands

- **Treat Q4 as a stress test, not just a performance peak.**
Use it to see where your strategy holds, where it breaks, and what needs improving.
- **Focus on insight, not just results.**
Data only matters if it teaches you about your customers, channels, and assumptions.
- **Act on what you learn and carry those insights into the next cycle.**
Don't let Q4 findings sit in a report.
- **Don't switch off after peak season.**
Use the post-Q4 period to fix gaps, strengthen foundations, and prepare for the year ahead.
- **Build for consistency, not intensity.**
Sustainable growth comes from systems and habits that improve steadily over time.
- **Turn Q4 customers into long-term value.**
Segment new and returning buyers, create tailored onboarding, and run early retention campaigns.
- **Manage margins and inventory strategically.**
Recover pricing in January, protect brand equity, and plan post-holiday sales deliberately.
- **Invest in brand and upper-funnel activity alongside short-term gains.**
This balances immediate performance with long-term growth.
- **Capture, analyse, and apply data to all decisions.**
Understand incrementality, market performance, and which channels deliver lasting customers.
- **Strengthen lifecycle marketing and loyalty programmes using Q4 insights.**
First-party data, automation, and international infrastructure make each subsequent peak stronger.

The Next Step

Where to go from here

During Q4, the busiest parts of your business face the most pressure. Campaigns, decisions, and customer touchpoints are all tested. Some things go well, others don't, and even small mistakes can end up costing more than you think. What matters is what lasts – steady margins, returning customers, and a clear idea of where to focus next.

10 takeaways to make it count

- 1. Start early.**
Q4 is hectic, so begin preparing well before the rush. Test ideas, set up systems, and make sure your data, inventory, and campaigns are in place.
- 2. Think across the business.**
Make sure media, creative, data, and operations all work together so nothing is pulling in a different direction.
- 3. Use local knowledge.**
Local In-Market Experts help you understand shopping habits, cultural differences, and messages that make sense for each market.
- 4. Put your data to work.**
Most brands have lots of first-party data but don't use it well. Keep it clean, connect it, and use it to understand customers and make better decisions.
- 5. Use paid media to test and build demand early.**
Don't wait for the peak. Run campaigns ahead of time, try different messages, and see what actually lands so you're not just reacting later on.
- 6. Treat SEO as something ongoing.**
It's not a one-off job, and traffic going up or down doesn't tell the whole story, especially with AI changing how people search. Keep your content useful and up to date and make sure you're showing up when people are looking to decide or buy.
- 7. Turn buyers into repeat customers.**
Peaks come and go, but relationships last. Follow up, personalise, and make people feel seen to encourage repeat business.
- 8. Plan inventory and pricing carefully.**
Avoid short-term clearance at the expense of your brand. Prepare January for growth, not just post-season sales.
- 9. Keep operations steady.**
A hectic Q4 doesn't excuse sloppy mistakes. Careful packaging, shipping, and handling protects your brand and keeps customers coming back.
- 10. Make the experience smooth and trustworthy.**
Fast checkout, clear delivery options, and easy returns matter more than ever. Customers notice when things are confusing or unreliable, and it can stop them from coming back.

Take the next step

Oban International helps brands make sense of data, media, and insights so they can perform in any market. If you're thinking about Q4 or want to tweak your approach:

- **Visit us:**
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Explore how digital marketing really works in your target markets

Want to know what really makes digital tick in different markets? Oban's country profiles give you the inside track. Covering the main markets across Europe, North America, APAC, the Middle East, and Latin America, these guides focus on what affects performance: search competition, platform quirks, trust and conversion behaviours, and local expectations for service and fulfilment.

They're designed to help you:

- Sense-check assumptions about 'similar' markets
- Spot hidden challenges before committing budgets
- Understand where to invest for maximum impact
- Turn seasonal peaks into long-term advantage

Launched with coverage of around 70% of global GDP, more country profiles will follow, so you can get a sharper, on-the-ground view wherever you operate or plan to grow.

Visit the profiles at
obaninternational.com/country-profiles



Some brands survive Q4, while others thrive.

This guide delivers insights from digital marketing experts on what truly drives results when the stakes are highest. It strips away the noise of vanity metrics to uncover the signals, choices, and systems that shape demand, influence behaviour, and safeguard performance when it matters most. Clear, practical, and incisive, this is what works in e-commerce today.

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