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How to win the Seasonal SEM Battle

TOP TIPS FOR YEAR-ON-YEAR SUCCESS

queryclick.com

Planning for, and coping with Seasonality comes with the territory in SEM.

The potential upside in Seasonal upsurges in search demand is huge but there is an extensive amount of planning, implementation and analysis required to be successful. So how do you set yourself up with a strategy that ensures you consistently win the Seasonal SEM battle year-after-year?

In this eBook, Malcolm Gibb, Head of Performance and Scott Donnelly, Head of Digital Strategy at QueryClick map out a roadmap for success that includes:

Malcolm Gibb
Head of Performance

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Understanding Seasonality

Understanding the nature of Seasonality is key, so here is a quick definition to set some context:

> *Seasonality* refers to the idea that there are predictable annually occurring changes in the way that customers behave throughout the year. This essentially enables us to predict what customers want to buy and when they want to buy it – and plan activity around that.

When it comes to SEM, this means you need to have an understanding of when people want to search for particular products around particular events, and ensure that your brand is positioned to capitalise on that.

There are 2 broad types of Seasonality

We take a closer at them both below:

Holiday or event-based Seasonality

This refers to Seasonality tied to peaks in search behaviours that take place every year.

Some of the most common examples of this are Christmas, Easter or Black Friday. But there are several others dotted around the calendar - for example, you are consistently going to see a spike in searches for flowers in February in the run-up to Valentine's Day. And we see another slight peak for flowers as we get into March around Mother's Day.

In the case of flower-buying, it then tails off dramatically for the rest of the year. So, understanding these Seasonal curves is vastly important for retailers especially if your product has such a Seasonal edge to it like flowers do. They represent pivotal periods when your products are in peak demand and, how well you do in the peak, can often be make or break for you in terms of your financial performance.

Time-based Seasonality

This refers to different times in the year when specific products are more likely to be bought by customers. So, for example, customers are more likely to want to buy shorts in the summer and they are more likely to want to buy hats and scarves in the winter. Other examples include gym memberships and travel, which both peak in and around January as people try to get fit after some of the excesses of the festive period. And book summer holidays to try and escape the dark days of winter.

Understanding and planning for these peaks in search demand is key, to know when you need to be most visible on search.

While both these types of Seasonality are essentially the same in terms of consumer behaviour, time-based Seasonality typically offers a longer window to be active. However, it can also be a little more unpredictable with things like the macroeconomic climate being more likely to impact things.

Why Seasonality matters for your brand

Before we dig into how you can improve your performance during Peak seasonal periods it is worth considering why Seasonality matters.

Take the retail sector for example where, according to **Statista**, total retail sales for the UK are forecast to hit £85 billion in 2023, a figure that jumps up to $966bn in the US.

Not only are these huge sums that are up for grabs during a relatively short peak period, they also make up to 20% of total annual retail sales.

Figures from **IMRG** point to the fact that events like Black Friday (which is part of this seasonal sales window) continue to grow in participation which is evidenced by the chart below which shows the YOY increase in retailers who had Black Friday campaigns live in 2022 v 2021.

Chart B: Number of retailers with a live BF campaign, 305 websites, 2021 VS 2022

Sectors including travel, confectionery and tourism are similarly affected by seasonality with marked peaks in activity at certain parts of the year, where demand surges for a given period.

So, taking advantage of Seasonality and Seasonal search demand matters. But how do you ensure your brand is a winner in the SEM stakes when the time comes? First up you need to be clear on when your Seasonal Peaks occur.

How to identify your Seasonal SEO peaks

The first place to try and understand your peak periods is to take a look in Google Analytics and Google Search Console.

If your marketing team is in-house you will probably have that information to hand. And you will most likely know when you are going to have your peak period. But if you don't, maybe you work in an agency and are onboarding a new client, these are two really good places to delve into and find out when traffic spikes for them, and also, what the behaviour looks like in the run-up to the spike.

This is going to give you a good understanding of what is going on with your website right now. But if you are looking to develop and roll out new products - and understand how Seasonal activity impacts search – several tools out there are helpful including:

Google Ads

Google Keyword Planner

The place to start is in **Google Keyword Planner** which is free to use and can be found within Google Ads. However, one of the slight limitations with the Planner is that, whilst you can get great historical data, if you aren't running a reasonable sum of money through a Google Ads account you will get 'range' data. This can be useful but is far more indicative in terms of actual peaks - and you also don't know what those searches look like.

| Keywords	Avg Monthly Searches	Three Month Change	YoY Change	
Shopping gifts	9,900	-34%	0%	Hi

Ahrefs

However, if you have a decent tool suite and you can invest in something like **Ahrefs**, you are going to be able to get this information at a far more granular level.

It will help you understand what those trends are for key search terms, year-on-year throughout the last few years, and goes as far back as 2015.
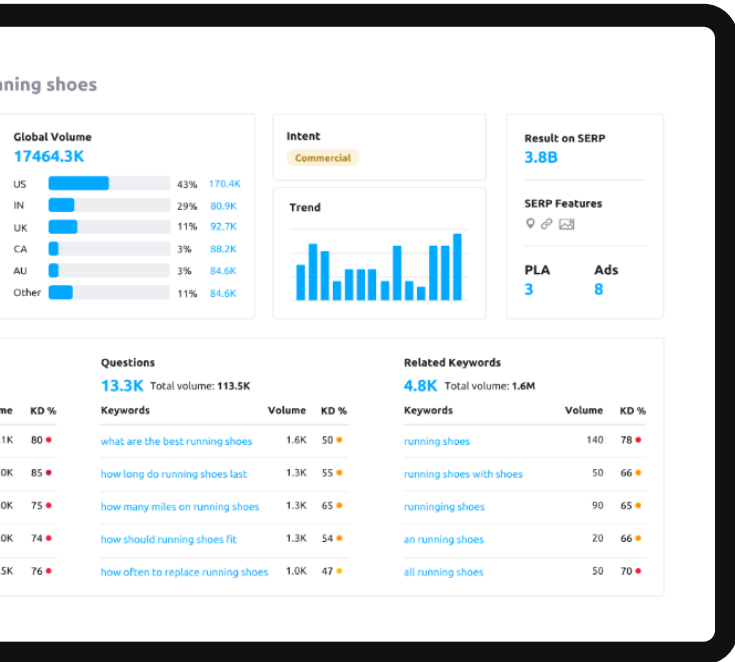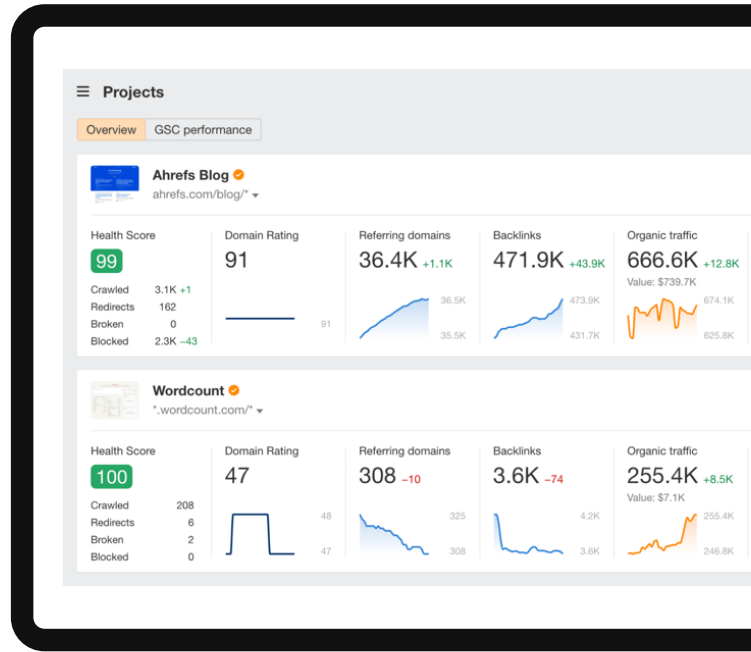
Semrush

Semrush is also another great tool that helps you to understand this, providing key data on Seasonal search terms including the detail on when they start to spike and peak - as well as how things look during the rest of the year for context and comparison.

But sometimes it's not so clear cut...

Sometimes when you look at this data the picture is not so clear.

The example here is from one of our clients. They don't have any core Seasonal peaks but some spikes happen throughout the year. However, within this, there is product-based Seasonality which means we must dig a little bit deeper to unearth what causes these spikes, and what's driving revenue for them at any given time over the year. This is important so that we can develop our SEO strategy off the back of that information. This helps to make sure that we are capitalising as much as we possibly can on this activity.

How to develop Seasonal SEO strategies

Now we move on to developing your Seasonal strategy. And you must be clear - not only on 'what' you are going to do – but also on 'when' you are going to do it.

This is where it helps to look at things in the following 3 distinct buckets:

Pre-Peak
→ Research & Planning

→ Content Creation

→ Adding to site

→ Promotion

→ Supporting Activity

Peak
→ Supplementary non-SEO activities

→ Work with Paid to assess brand performance

→ Hygiene checks

Post-Peak
→ Reporting

→ Leveraging ever-green content around seasonal peaks

→ Pre-Peak

The first bucket for this is what we would call 'Pre-Peak'.

This covers anything that needs to be done or put in place before the actual peak period itself including:

Research and Planning

It starts with research and planning – which you should be starting as early as possible - even in the realms of five to six months in advance.

Take the real-world example of a chocolate retailer, they typically plan for Christmas in July! That is when they had to start understanding what demand there was going to be, what they were going to do from a product perspective, how it was going to look and feel, what content was going to be added to the website and how customers are going to search for it - so that they can optimise for that in advance.

One of the key aspects here is not only identifying the peak for activity but also working back to know exactly where the demand starts to surge. Because in reality, it doesn't just happen overnight. For example, the Christmas surge in demand doesn't happen on Christmas Eve. It starts somewhere in October and through November, before really ratcheting up in December.

Content Creation

Knowing the timelines here is vitally important because of the knock-on effect on the creation of Seasonal content – which needs to be done as early as possible – to avoid a rush to create and upload it around deadline times for Seasonal campaigns.

Adding to the site - it can also pay dividends to add it to the site early. This doesn't mean that you need to make it prominent - on the homepage for example - but it needs to be somewhere that allows it to be indexed and crawled. So that when you move it more centrally on the site to meet peak demand and add it to the main navigation, customers will find it through Organic Search.

Promotion

With seasonal activity, it can be great to create and promote some lead-gen content in advance. Things like a video or blog post on the 'top 10 big Christmas gadgets' for this year, for example, which is something that customers start to pick up in their research phase.

Supporting activity

It is also worth looking at how you can leverage some of the other channels that you have at your disposal, alongside SEO. To promote this content and get your message out there nice and effectively, so SEO content is working a lot harder and is not working in a vacuum.

→ **Peak**

During the Peak itself, when it comes to SEO you are a little hamstrung in terms of making any changes that are going to quickly impact things. The lesson here is that if you are not ready at this stage then you never will be for this year.

This is even more evident with events like Black Friday, where the window is quite small, and also at Easter - which has a lot less lead time than Christmas for example.

Supplementary activity and working with Paid colleagues

What you can do at this stage is work closely with other channels. For example, if you are seeing certain search terms that are starting to spike in Google Search Console and that you didn't expect to see you can feed this into your Paid team.

Work with Paid Search to assess brand performance

Working closely with your Paid Search team is something we strongly suggest you do anyway. For example, an event like Black Friday is a very heavily branded search-based event (we have a beauty retailer client and 77% of all their Black Friday traffic comes through branded Black Friday terms and we also work with an Activewear Leisure brand and 99% of their Black Friday traffic comes in the same way).

So, the key is to work cohesively with Paid teams to ensure that you are not necessarily spending money on all of those branded searches. Because the reality is you are probably going to capture the vast majority of them anyway. You can also help inform Paid colleagues where the search demand is coming from in a non-brand sense - so that they can focus their efforts on actually driving true incremental value in revenue through PPC.

70%
of Black Friday terms from brand

Health & Beauty Retailers

99%
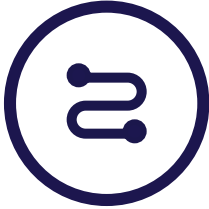of Black Friday terms from brand

Activewear Retailers

Make regular, simple hygiene checks to ensure success

There is nothing more frustrating than having a great strategy that falls on poor implementation.

So, make sure you have a structured approach including hygiene checks.
Here is our checklist for that to include:

URLS
Check all of your ad level urls for broken links, broken tracking, 404s including all of your destination urls on ad accounts and product feeds.

Ads/Creative
Double check any Display, Meta and PMAX assets and make sure the correct promotional activity is being advertised.

Tracking
Ensure all of your promotional activity is being tracked and can be measured - e.g. using UTM trackers to split out Black Friday deals.

GA4
Ensure your GA4 is tracking activity correctly and that GSC/Gads is all linked up correctly- ensuring that your tags/data streams are working with a plan to avoid any loss in data.

Measure
Measuring the incrementality of Peak will only be prevalent around 2-3 weeks after Black Friday- keep touchpoints on measurement and attribution throughout.

→ Post-Peak

At this point, the Peak has come and gone.
And the focus turns to:

Reporting

Here we need to make sure that we can look back and say – 'what happened and how is that going against expectations?' And then use the core learnings that can then feed back into the next period so that we're constantly learning and adapting. And also making the kind of required changes that we need to as we move forward throughout the year and head towards the peak again next year.

Leveraging Evergreen Content

Now the last thing we can do is to define if there is anything we can leverage within an evergreen content space. Seasonal peaks happen at the same time every year but is there content that can live on the website that might capture that demand or something that we can reuse and resurface next year?

Currys is a big Black Friday player and they have done well here by creating a Black Friday page that has been static and stayed the same year on year. Here are some of the key features of it:

→ It is the same **URL every single year** which means the URL builds up authority over time.

→ By **resurfacing it and bringing it back** they have a better and better chance every single year to do well when it comes to Black Friday searches.

→ It is often **heavily branded but there are non-branded searches** like 'Black Friday electric offers' or 'electrical offers Black Friday' which they do very well for.

→ **Currys brings up their Black Friday page well in advance**, weeks or months before the peak.

→ They just ask you to register to win a £100 gift card and these little incentives are great to kind of **get people involved so that you're aware** and this builds up black Friday performance when the day comes.

→ but it's a great data capture exercise helping them **build the customer database** that they can then use intelligently when they move into peak time.
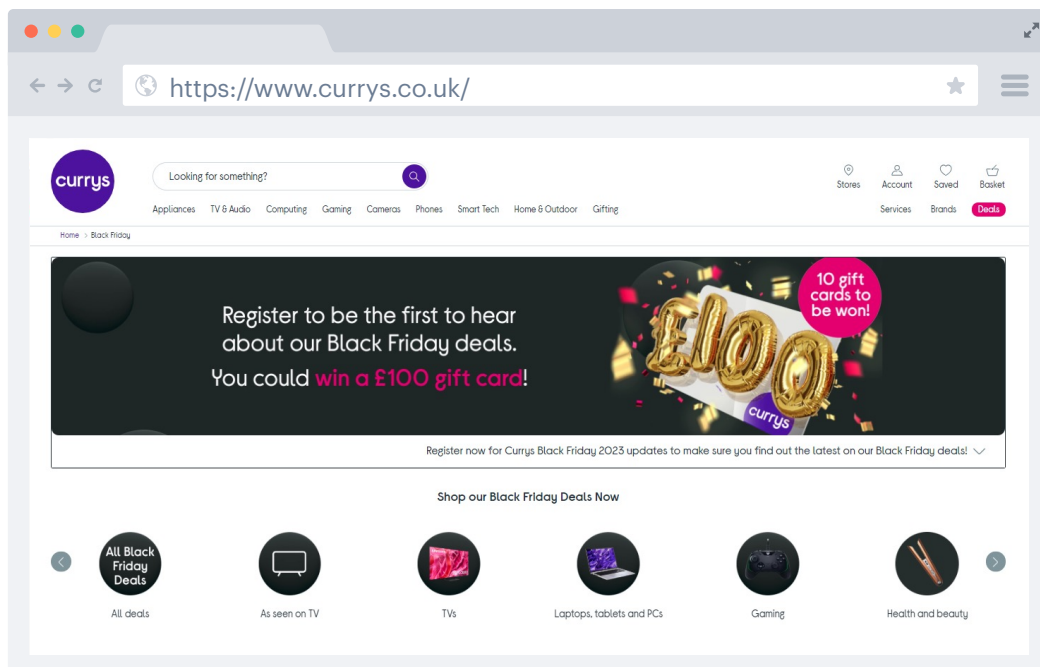
Other things you can also do with these types of pages, to make them more relevant is to change things like page titles, (for example updating the year in the page title) so that customers know this is the right page.

3 tips for unleashing optimum performance during the Peak itself

So, those are the key periods you need to build into your strategy and planning, but what are some of the things you can do to impact performance during the Peak period of demand?

Here are our 3 key tips:

1　　**Maintain a competitive advantage**

First and foremost, you need to ensure you are positioned well in competitive terms. Here are some key areas to focus on:

Utilise AI-driven competitive intelligence

Having a clear understanding of what your competition is doing during periods of peak demand is essential to enable you to assess, and react, to changes in price etc.

AI can't solve all of your challenges. However, using tools like **Google BARD** that can browse the web provides quick insights into product-related information. This can be useful for rapidly finding out key pricing information or deals across competitors in real time, and finding gaps you can exploit in your SEM strategy.

Understand deals (and ads) competitors are pushing

Free tools can help you to understand what ads your competitors are running out there.

These include:

→ Google Ads Transparency Centre

This is a **searchable database** of all the ads which are being served across the Google Ads network including:

→ The ads an advertiser has run

→ Which ads were shown in a certain region

→ The last date an ad ran, and the format of the ad

Despite being originally developed with the end user in mind it is a useful tool for marketers too.

Meta Ad Library

This **library** enables you to search all ads across Meta Technologies as well as:

→ Ads about social issues, elections or politics that have run in the past seven years

→ Ads that have run anywhere regionally in the past year

Both are useful for understanding what deals and recent ads your competition is running, but it is worth adding the health warning that it does not work for every advertiser – so try it out for yourself.

Use the price competitiveness reports in GMC

Google Merchant Centre (GMC) enables you to attract more customers by listing your products and services across a range of Google properties including Google Search & Shopping, Maps, YouTube, and more. It offers:

→   Enhanced Product Visibility on Google Shopping.

→   Simplified Product Data Management.

→   Advanced Performance Insights and Analytics.

→   Seamless Integration with Google Ads.

→   Access to Additional Google Marketing Tools
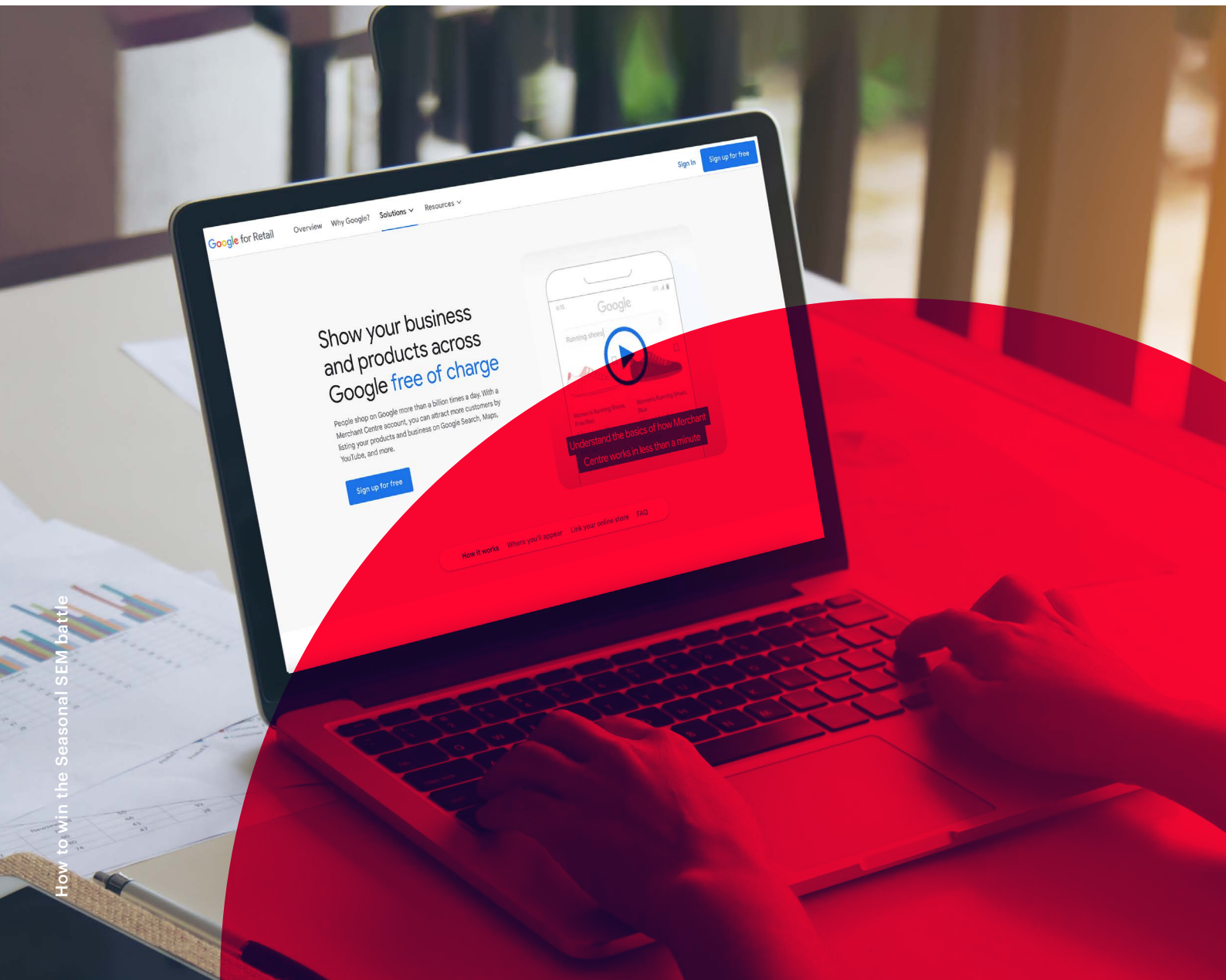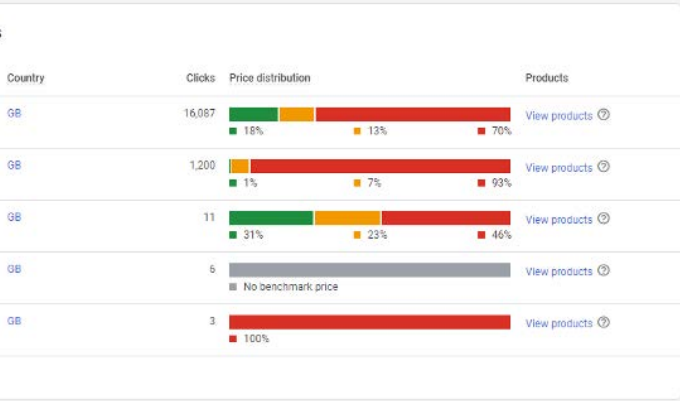
You can use the price competitive reports in GMC to understand price benchmarking across your key product categories.

This will give you insight into products that are too expensive or are under-priced compared to competitor products. This is essential information for you to have if you are planning discounting or promotional activity.

GMC Price Insight reports can also help identify how far off the price point you are with key products. If you are struggling with conversions on key brands or products, you can also use it as an indication of where to apply further promotions or discounting.

2 **Maximise upper funnel demand**

Building upper funnel demand at this point is key, so you should:

Ensure SEM activity is not working in a vacuum

The reality is that consumers are increasingly on multi-device and multi-channel buying journeys. And your marketing approach at peak times is going to have to reflect this.

So, plan on using an omni-channel approach that works out how you can leverage activity across other channels – and avoid a single SEM channel pitch that is only going to harm effectiveness.

Cut-through is also going to be important at what is a busy time when everyone is pitching hard. Aim to rise above the noise and be clear on why it is you should get your customers' money.

Ebook
Podcast
Infographic
Social
Blog Post
Email
Video

Build higher funnel demand with Demand-Gen on Google Ads

Make sure you leverage Demand-Gen in **Google Ads**.

According to **research by Google/IPSOS**, 91% of consumers took action immediately after discovering new products or brands on Google feeds, like Discover or Gmail.

| **YouTube Shorts** | **YouTube In-Stream** | **YouTube In-Feed** | **Discover** | **Gmail** |
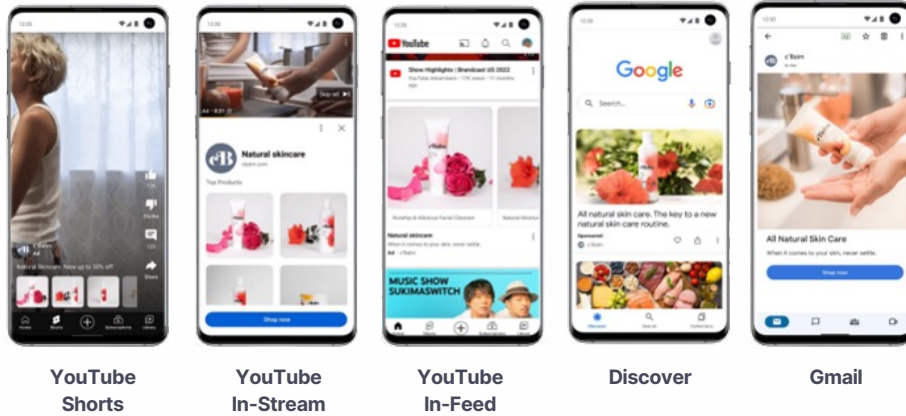
Demand Gen makes it easy to leverage your top-performing image and video assets into Google Ads to take advantage of this demand. It also enables you to move beyond existing audiences with lookalike segments based on audience lists.

This feature is available in all Google Ad accounts with all existing Discovery campaigns being moved across to Demand Gen.

Make the most of Youtube

Video plays a key role in both early gift research and last-minute scrambles.

Advertisers that run YouTube ads in addition to search ads are seeing **search conversion volume** that is **8% higher** and **search CPAs** that are **4% lower.**

With shoppers doing more research the journey to purchase has become longer. Make sure you are present across channels and generating excitement during this period.

Video plays a role in both early gift research and last minute scrambles

Gift Guides

OCT 2022   NOV 2022   DEC 2023

YouTube Views   Google.com Searches
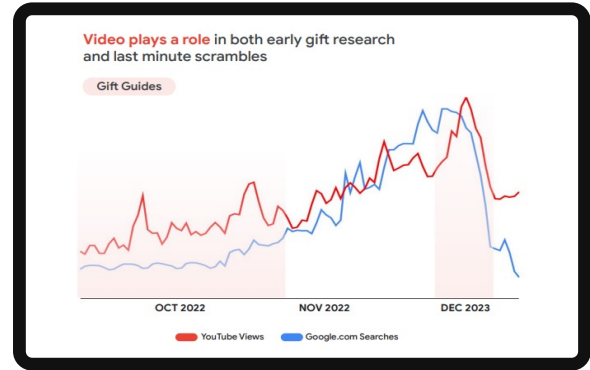
There are **21.8M UK gift shoppers on YouTube** so testing Demand Gen (& also Performance Max) to serve across this channel is a great opportunity to connect with your target audience.

3 Maximise conversion and revenue

And once you have a potential customer's interest getting the sale over the line is key. Here are some tips to help you influence that.

Maximise use of audience data within GA4 One of the strengths of GA4 is the ability to create audiences that bring focus to your Paid advertising activity.

Make sure that you are set up to use GA4 effectively during times of Peak Seasonal demand by building out audiences that make sense for your objectives. For example, consider creating an audience that is made up of non-converters that can be targeted across Google Ads.
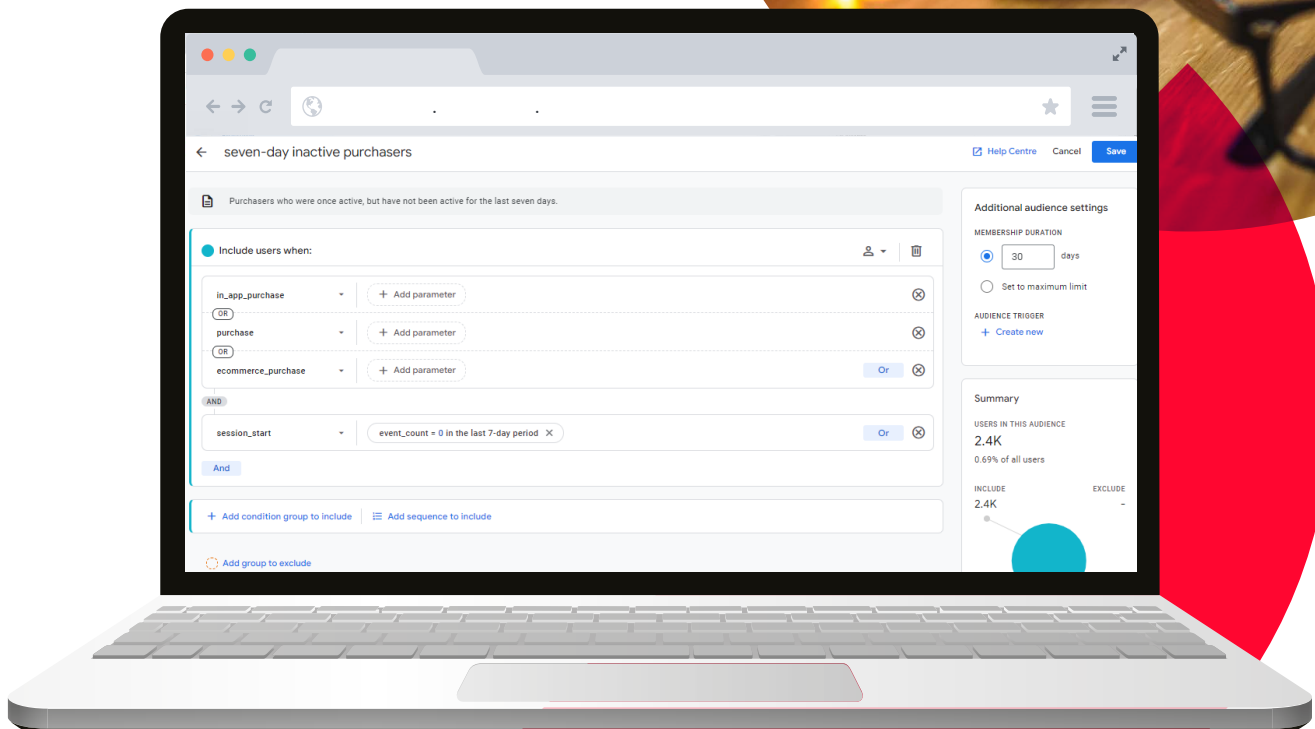
Optimise your product feed in the GMC

Preparing your product feed in the GMC is pivotal in having successful shopping campaigns that drive traffic and convert over peak periods. Shoppers during this time are looking for the best prices, offers and delivery or returns options.

In particular, things to be aware of include:
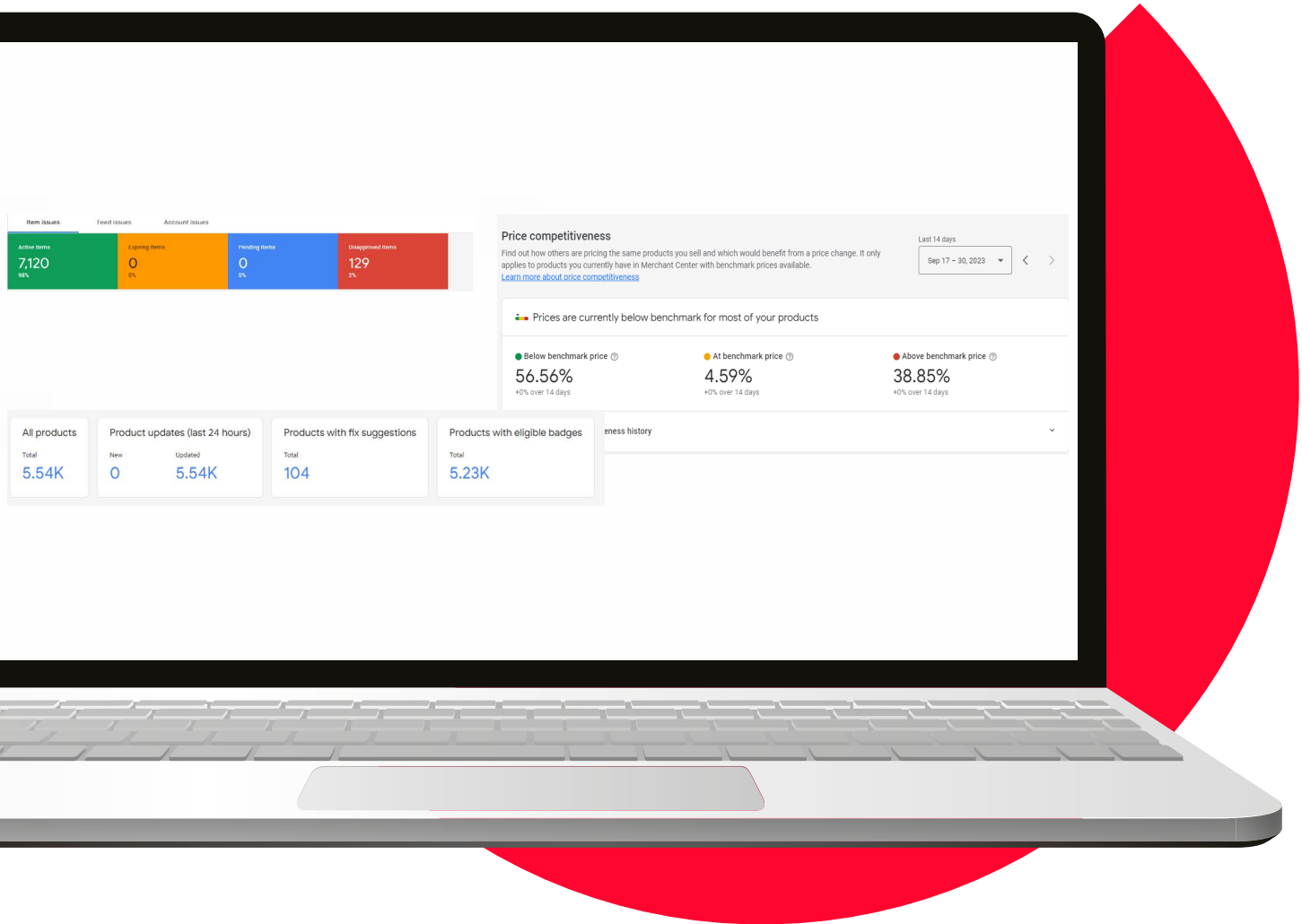
⊙ Promotions and products can be disapproved – **ensure you have alerts set** to avoid any loss in serving key products

⊙ Be proactive and **ensure your attributes are optimised properly before the peak** so you can take maximum advantage when things get busy

⊙ Ensure **correct sale pricing and promotions** are applied in GMC

Remember customers want a quick deal

Potential delays in your competitors getting products and services to customers put doubt in the customer's mind about conversion. And is a potential targeting opportunity.

Take retail, for example. The 2023 Shein and Temu delivery lead times mean there are cut-off times between the 8th -15th of December, a period while customers are still in shopping mode. This potentially opens a window for other retailers to pick off the demand that they are missing during this period by targeted offers on Google Ads etc.

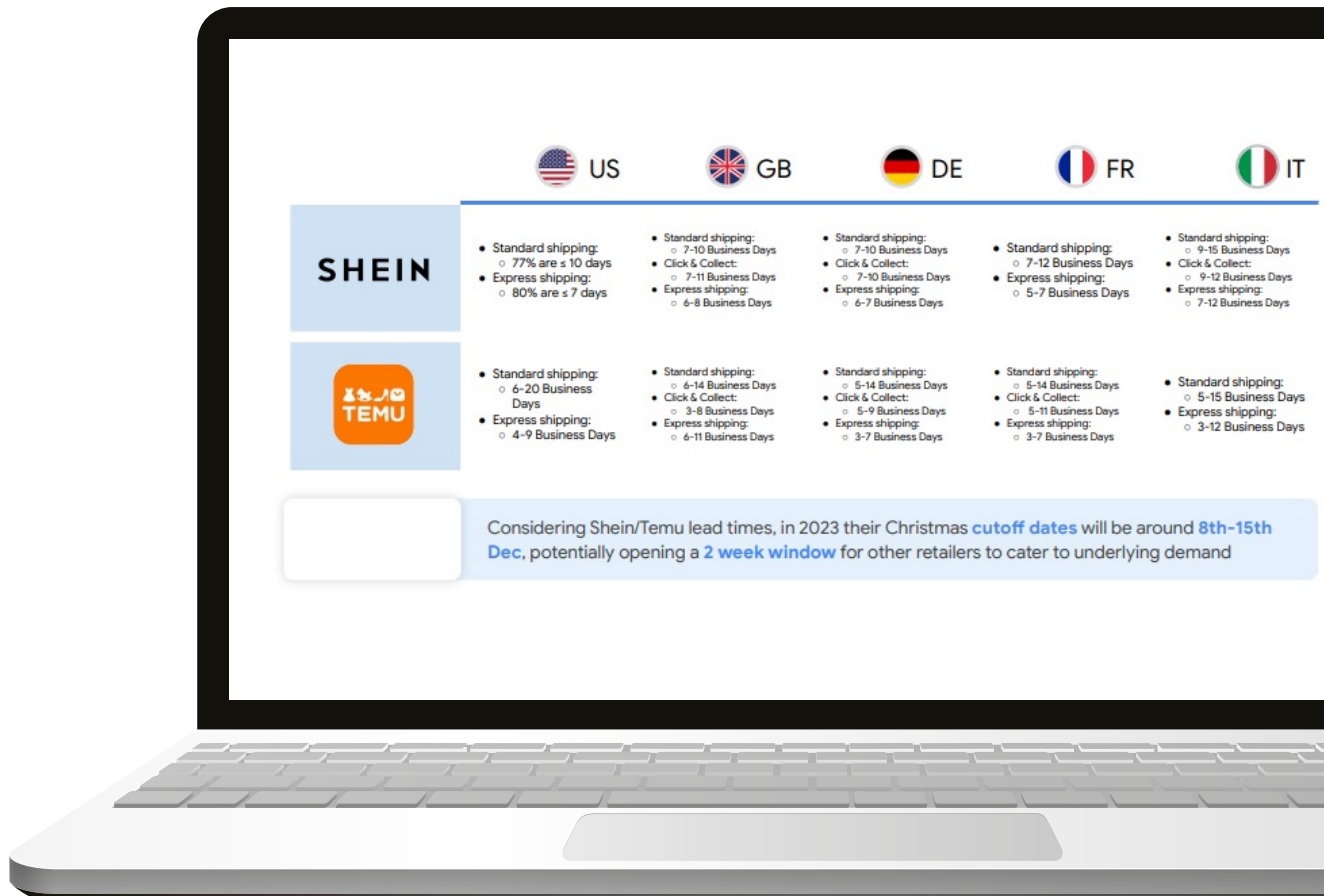|	US	GB	DE	FR	IT

SHEIN	• Standard shipping:
	  ○ 77% are ≤ 10 days
	• Express shipping:
	  ○ 80% are ≤ 7 days
		• Standard shipping:
		  ○ 7-10 Business Days
		• Click & Collect:
		  ○ 7-11 Business Days
		• Express shipping:
		  ○ 6-8 Business Days
			• Standard shipping:
			  ○ 7-10 Business Days
			• Click & Collect:
			  ○ 7-10 Business Days
			• Express shipping:
			  ○ 6-7 Business Days
				• Standard shipping:
				  ○ 7-12 Business Days
				• Express shipping:
				  ○ 5-7 Business Days
					• Standard shipping:
					  ○ 9-15 Business Days
					• Click & Collect:
					  ○ 9-12 Business Days
					• Express shipping:
					  ○ 7-12 Business Days

TEMU	• Standard shipping:
	  ○ 6-20 Business Days
	• Express shipping:
	  ○ 4-9 Business Days
		• Standard shipping:
		  ○ 6-14 Business Days
		• Click & Collect:
		  ○ 3-8 Business Days
		• Express shipping:
		  ○ 6-11 Business Days
			• Standard shipping:
			  ○ 5-14 Business Days
			• Click & Collect:
			  ○ 5-9 Business Days
			• Express shipping:
			  ○ 3-7 Business Days
				• Standard shipping:
				  ○ 5-14 Business Days
				• Click & Collect:
				  ○ 5-11 Business Days
				• Express shipping:
				  ○ 3-7 Business Days
					• Standard shipping:
					  ○ 5-15 Business Days
					• Express shipping:
					  ○ 3-12 Business Days

Considering Shein/Temu lead times, in 2023 their Christmas **cutoff dates** will be around **8th-15th Dec**, potentially opening a **2 week window** for other retailers to cater to underlying demand

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Need to learn more?

Hopefully, this has given you something to think about as you begin to shape an ongoing strategy that ensures you are best placed to win the Seasonal SEM battle year after year!

QueryClick is a challenger agency which delivers unified new customer acquisition strategies with high ROI. If you would like to talk to one of our experts about your plans for Seasonal SEM then why not **schedule a call?**

CONTACT US