How shipping and fulfilment can win you gold this peak season

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The peak season could be considered the Olympics of retail. Competition is tough with all the players performing at their best. But there's also a huge crowd to help celebrate your accomplishments - if you end up a winner.

Usually lasting from October to January, the peak season is a long-distance run. This year will be an event to remember, with online retail sales expected to overtake physical retail. Mastercard SpendingPulse reported 49% of all holiday season purchases last year were completed online, up from 47.2% the year prior.

As 2020 showed us, however, changes can happen rapidly. For example, in Victoria, Australia, 36% of the year's online retail purchases happened between July to October due to lockdowns. eCommerce orders for the state actually declined in November and December. So this year, it's even more important to get planning early in case of unexpected changes.

The stakes are high, but with thoughtful preparation, you may take home gold. Not a gold medal, that is, but something far more valuable to any retailer or eCommerce business. The gold-star reviews and feedback you'll receive from customers, which are the real prize. Deliver an outstanding experience and customers will be cheering your name. And your brand will be remembered far beyond the finish line.

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You can't go the distance without the warm-up exercises

Planning and preparation are a vital part of any race. The following tips will put your fulfilment and shipping processes in prime position this peak season to create winning results. Read on for all the ideas from inventory management to post-shipment customer experiences.

Get your inventory running at the right cadence

Many companies start off using spreadsheets to track inventory. They're quick to pick up and use for the basics. They can get very messy, very quickly, though. It can be nearly impossible to track remaining delivery days, expected stock levels, and re-order points without a degree in formulas and functions. You also rely on manual updates and processes, which limits scalability and increases the risk of errors. On the other hand, an inventory management system gives you better visibility of your stock position, backorders and commitments, and demand estimation. Some systems will even let you specify minimum and maximum levels to trigger automated re-ordering.

Leading up to peak season, you'll want to optimise stock based on trends and changes. Over order, and you might need to reduce prices or rely on post-season sales to run out excess inventory. Under order, and your customers may be waiting until after peak season to receive their orders. To have confidence in stock levels, report on monthly demand trends and compare these to previous years. This data gives you a better idea of the commitments needed for different product lines. Take note of short-term trends as well, particularly where lockdowns, or conversely eased restrictions, have affected the usual demand.

If you're running short on warehouse space, you should also consider a 3PL (3rd Party Logistics) supplier. A 3PL can manage storage at scale and provide value-added services like returns, cross-docking, and even improved security.

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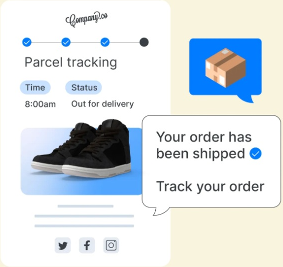
Position your brand ahead of the pack



Consumers have come to expect personalisation. Email campaigns, digital communications, and even websites are now tailored to shoppers. Branded packaging can also bring a more personal touch when it comes to the physical experience. What's more exciting than another plain brown box or a grey satchel? Company branding on the outside, thank you notes, custom packaging tape, and even flyers inside that up-sell or cross-sell products all create a more memorable customer experience.

The proper packaging can also build trust in your business. As shown in the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer report, embracing sustainable practices increases the likelihood of brand trust by 5.8%. Consider using sustainable and appropriately-sized packaging for products to reduce the environmental impact. You can then take the opportunity to remind customers of your considerate packaging processes. A notice on packing slips and invoices, the packaging itself, or branded pre-delivery notifications will further amplify your message.

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To outperform, keep customers informed

Delayed shipping was a recurring theme in 2020. Supply chain issues, social distancing in warehouses, and numerous other issues created setbacks around the globe. Sometimes delays are unforeseeable and unavoidable. To make a positive impression that shows how important your customers are, keep them informed and up-to-date.

It takes a lot of time to track deliveries and send out updates manually. Thankfully, automated fulfilment and shipping software is helping savvy retailers outperform expectations - without even breaking a sweat. These systems import delivery events directly from couriers and send updates and notifications with your custom branding and messaging. Learn more about branding the last mile of fulfilment for additional tips.

During the peak season lead-up, it's critical to keep customers updated with shipping cut-offs. Email and SMS are effective ways to communicate and set expectations with customers. You can also use these channels to remind shoppers about promotions or special offers. Branded updates that create excellent experiences, coupled with a subtle upsell or two, can be a winning combination.

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Reduce the work from orders going full circle around the track

Returns are a high cost to businesses - financially and in the time and resources needed to manage them.

A trend that increased enormously in 2020 was bracketing, where consumers buy multiple versions of items to try at home and return those that aren't suitable. Shoppers are now using their bedrooms as fitting rooms, as commonly seen by online fashion retailers. Over 60%* of consumers now bracket their purchases, which drives up costs for eCommerce brands.

To cut down the time and effort involved in returns, efficient online retailers are leveraging self-service returns. Customers receive a branded order tracking page, enter the return details, and generate their return label instantly. Not only does this save you time, but it also enhances the customer experience and creates loyalty. In a recent consumer study, 76%* of first-time customers who had an "easy" or "very easy" returns experience said they would shop with that retailer again.

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Automate to keep a winning pace

Many growing businesses struggle with how to scale quickly. Some have experienced massive demand shifts for product lines throughout COVID-19. Others recognise the need to scale up or down as peak periods come and go.

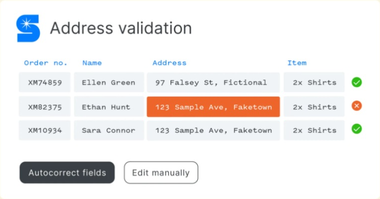
Automation of repetitive tasks and low-value processes enables rapid scalability. It's also a clever way to do more with fewer resources, reduce overall costs, and improve the customer experience. Here are a few areas of automation, included in a fulfilment and shipping platform like Starshipit, that saves retailers and eCommerce brands serious time and effort.

Automate decisions for easy shipping

Shipping platforms allow you to automate a range of decisions. You can add pre-defined triggers to select specific couriers based on factors like:

- Least-cost routing
- Item weights and sizes
- Geography (domestic or international shipping)
- Signature on delivery requirements
- Items containing lithium batteries
- Order value
- Delivery insurance

The list goes on, and these are just a few examples of how to automate decisions for easy shipping. As a result, efficiency becomes built into the fulfilment process and enables customers to receive faster deliveries in ways tailored to their needs.



Address validation

Order no.	Name	Address	Item	
XM74859	Ellen Green	97 Falsey St, Fictional	2x Shirts	✓
XM82375	Ethan Hunt	123 Sample Ave, Faketown	2x Shirts	✗
XM10934	Sara Connor	123 Sample Ave, Faketown	2x Shirts	✓

Address auto-correction

Within a single shipping platform, you can correct invalid addresses automatically. The process is as easy as filtering orders to show the incorrect addresses and hitting an auto-correct button. Changes can then be reviewed and updated in bulk.

Auto-correction is an impressive time-saver, removing the need to look up addresses on third-party sites or contact customers to confirm. The validation ensures delays are minimised, and deliveries arrive where they're supposed to, every time.

Documentation and integration

Manually producing order documentation and filling out forms creates a range of bottlenecks. Additionally, many growing companies are capped by the physical resources available to do those tasks. Instead of spending long hours producing fulfilment and shipping documentation, look at what you can automate and produce in bulk, such as:

- Shipping labels
- Packing slips and manifests
- Customs documentation
- Customs submissions

The time you spend logging in to multiple systems and generating separate documentation all adds up. However, integration between your couriers and fulfilment and shipping software allows you to manage all fulfilment within a single system. You can suddenly print labels, packing slips, customs documents and more in bulk, and even automate customs submissions.

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How will you perform this peak season?

Holiday season purchases are expected to inch even higher this year thanks to continued increases in online shopping activity. Preparation is key to becoming a star performer that delivers outstanding customer experiences.

Here's a quick recap of how to warm up for the big race ahead:

- Inventory management is key to making the busy period run like clockwork and increase order turn-around
- Use branding, personalisation and packaging to stand out from the crowd
- Leave lasting impressions of your brand through excellent communication with customers
- Save time and improve customer loyalty with self-service returns
- Leverage automation to do more with less and get orders to customers faster

Start planning now to help your brand receive golden feedback from customers - and be remembered far beyond the finish line.

Automate your shipping and fulfilment processes

How can an automated fulfilment and shipping platform enable you to create winning results? Ask an expert or start a 30-day trial (no credit card details required).

Starshipit

Starshipit is the best practice shipping and fulfilment platform that helps retailers save time and deliver great shipping experiences.

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