THE MONTHLY INTELLIGENCE T. T. I. P. REPORT
Trends in Progress
IMAGINATION NETWORK · HOLIDAY EDITION · NOVEMBER 2026



Holiday boutique shopping. AI-generated concept image.

Shoppers still plan to spend, but value is shaping the purchase

The holiday outlook is positive, but shoppers are still paying close attention to value. Retailers are extending promotions, and the latest retail and licensing developments offer useful questions for artists, agencies and manufacturers preparing for the season and January Market.

+4.2%	$779	27%
NRF holiday retail sales forecast	Circana average planned holiday spend	plan to give an experience

GIFTWARE · ART LICENSING · RETAIL · PRACTICAL AI

Research snapshot reviewed through November 2, 2026

01 / RETAILER AND CONSUMER DEMAND

Growth forecast, cautious shopper

The sales outlook points up, but surveys suggest deal-aware and selective households.

The latest evidence is mixed in a useful way. Shoppers still plan to celebrate, but surveys show deal-seeking, channel choice and value shaping the path to purchase.

The measures answer different questions

NRF forecasts U.S. November–December retail sales of $1.013 trillion, up 4.2% from 2025. Its October shopper survey says 56% expect the economy to affect holiday spending and 64% are likely to do most shopping over Thanksgiving weekend. NRF's sales forecast models total retail sales; the separate survey describes consumer plans. [1] [5]

Circana's survey of 3,534 U.S. consumers puts expected average holiday spend at $779 versus $796 last year, and frames its Q4 forecast as a range from −1% to +2.5%. PwC estimates gift spending will dip about 2%. Mastercard's SpendingPulse forecast is +5.5% nominal holiday retail sales for Nov. 1–Dec. 24, with 2.8 percentage points attributed to inflation. These are different measures and populations, not competing estimates of one identical figure. [2] [3] [4]

The macro backdrop is also split: the advance estimate showed Q3 U.S. GDP growing at a 3.8% annual rate, while September PCE inflation accelerated to 3.6% year over year. Before Election Day on Nov. 3, Reuters reported University of Michigan sentiment near a record low even as Conference Board confidence improved in October. Neither poll proves the election is changing shopping behavior. [7] [8]

Source / measure	Latest read	What it counts
NRF	+4.2% to $1.013T	Nov.–Dec. U.S. total retail sales forecast; includes non-holiday purchases in retail categories.
Circana	$779 expected spend; −2% YoY	Surveyed consumer intentions; sales outlook spans −1% to +2.5% for Q4.
PwC	Gift spend about −2%	Consumer survey estimate for gift spending, not all retail sales.
Mastercard MEI	+5.5% nominal	SpendingPulse estimate excluding gas and autos, Nov. 1–Dec. 24; includes price effects.

PITCH IMPLICATION Build an accessible price ladder around meaningful value: useful pieces, a personal detail, a collectible hook or a gift-plus-experience bundle. Track unit movement and product mix alongside revenue; nominal sales growth can reflect price inflation as well as more purchases.

02 / GIFT OPPORTUNITIES

The gift is still an occasion

Intent, assortment and live retail signals point to practical ways to make a modest ticket feel considered.

NRF wish-list intent places gift cards (47%) and clothing (44%) first, followed by books/media (25%) and personal care/beauty (24%). Separately, 27% say they plan to give an experience, up from 19% five years ago. These are self-reported plans, not category sales. [5] [6]

Affordable personal expression

Ornaments, stationery, beauty add-ons and customizable gifts can make a modest ticket feel personal. Make the detail visible in the product story.

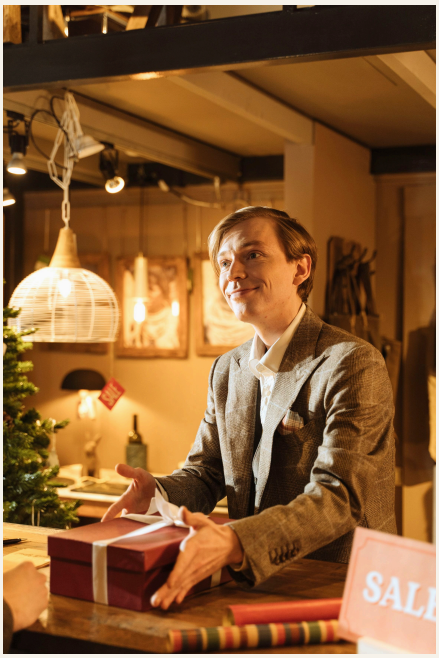
Experience-linked gifting

Pair a practical item with a craft night, hobby, local outing or hosting ritual. Test gift sets rather than assuming experience gifting converts to merchandise.

Use live assortment as a snapshot

On Nov. 2, Walmart's Christmas best-seller page included ornament sets, including one showing 100+ bought since the prior day; Target's assortment page flagged Advent calendars as best sellers. This is a dynamic, platform-specific snapshot, not a category-wide ranking. [13] [14]

Compare value-led items with products that offer personalization, quality or licensed storytelling. Keep the distinction between stated intent, an assortment listing and actual sales clear.



A gift being prepared at a seasonal retail counter. Photo: cottonbro studio / Pexels.

READING SHOPPER SIGNALS Promotion response, price changes and bestseller rankings reflect a particular retailer and moment. Election-week sentiment may affect the mood, but available evidence does not establish a causal link between the midterms and holiday sales.

03 / TREND RADAR

The handmade mark, the personal gift, the small delight

Search and platform signals point to expressive, tactile and personal holiday choices. They are useful starting points for tests, not proof of a universal trend.

The opportunity is to build testable capsules rather than declare one winning look.

The handmade illustration is a concept visualization of craft, personalization and holiday ritual. It is not a measured trend image or a confirmed retailer assortment.



Generated concept illustration for handmade holiday gifting; not a confirmed product assortment.

Signal	What the source says	Product / pitch test
Maker detail	Etsy U.S. searches, three months to Sept. 14 vs. prior year: hand-painted +280%, hand-woven +230%, hand-thrown +150%. [9]	Show brush marks, stitching, material and process. Test artisan-finished looks and licensed art that leaves room for the maker's hand.
Personal and pet gifting	Etsy reports pet-gifting searches doubled, pet ornaments +22%, and personalized friend gifts +1,400%. APPA projects the overall U.S. pet industry at $165B in 2026 while noting stronger value-seeking. [9] [15]	Test personalized pet keepsakes and low-to-mid price add-ons. Do not read total pet-industry spend as holiday giftware demand.
Craft as a gathering	Etsy reports DIY-activity searches +8,500% and beginner sewing-pattern searches +125%; its data is marketplace-specific. [9]	Test craft-night kits, ornament projects and giftable supplies. Make ease-of-use, kit contents and the finished result clear.
Collectibles and fandom	TikTok Shop says U.S. marketplace collectibles sales rose 230% year over year in October; September searches for "squishy toys" rose 149% month over month. Company/platform-reported, not total-market demand. [10]	Test small collectibles, buildable formats and character-led gifts with clear display or use value.
Pinterest planning	A secondary report citing U.S. Pinterest Trends for the week of Oct. 5 showed "gift ideas for mom" +200% month over month and gift baskets +100%; starting query volumes were not supplied. [11]	Use as a timing and keyword prompt only. Verify in Pinterest Trends and against category or sales data before scaling. [41]

DESIGN READ A restrained version of maximalism can give holiday décor and gifting more personality: rich color, ornamented surfaces and tactile materials, balanced with clearer shapes and price points. Keep maker-led nostalgia, natural texture and playful statement accents in distinct visual lanes.

EVIDENCE CHECK Faire's September wholesale report points to squishy gifts, whimsical beauty and affordable statement jewelry through search and industry reporting, not published orders or sell-through. Pinterest and Etsy figures above are searches; TikTok's collectibles figure is platform-reported sales. [12] [41]

04 / LICENSING AND PRODUCT OPPORTUNITIES

From archive to object; from brand to character

Recent launches show how cultural and artist archives can become everyday products, and how a brand's own icon can become a collectible character.

These launches are useful pitch examples, but announcements and preorder figures are not audited sell-through. For each opportunity, confirm category, territory, timing, rights and channel before describing a launch as broad demand.

Date / signal	Verified development	Strategic read and follow-up
Nov. 2 · BEARPAW	Skyline Apparel Group received a men's indoor/outdoor apparel license covering flannels, shackets, workwear, loungewear and more. Initial holiday distribution is limited; broader rollout is planned for Fall 2027. [16]	Extend comfort and outdoor heritage. Confirm channel scope, design handoff and 2027 sell-in milestones.
Oct. 28 · Paperblanks x NYBG	The globally available Golden Fritillaria stationery collection draws on an 1827 botanical book and watercolor plates. The partners describe it as the first release in an ongoing collaboration. [17]	Translate archive, place and conservation story into useful objects. Pitch a coherent collection, not decoration alone.
Oct. 28 · Crocs	Crocs introduced Niles the Crocodile as a character and announced a U.S. collectible plush launch for Nov. 17 ahead of its 25th anniversary in 2027. [18]	Watch how a brand-owned character extends into companion goods and storytelling; adoption beyond launch remains to be seen.
Oct. 30 · Licensed tech	Licensing International cited EverBoard's Hasbro-licensed game table, exclusive at Best Buy through the holidays, and Particula's Harry Potter smart chess with an initial 1,000-unit preorder. [19]	A license may help explain unfamiliar tech. Ask what the product does without the IP and whether content and gameplay rights are clear.

A good license gives the product a reason to exist. For a pitch, show the product's use, the role of the property and the assortment logic together. Confirm rights before building a line around a character, archive or brand extension.

05 / CHRISTMAS 2026

Four concept directions to test

Build concise capsules that join a recognizable story to a useful product and a clear price point.

Maker-led keepsakes

Ornaments, tabletop and paper goods that show visible craft, personalization or a specific artist’s hand.

Small collectible gifts

A plush character or ornament with a display or customization element, supported by affordable companion pieces.

Nostalgia with a new use

Archival art and heritage motifs translated into practical stationery, kitchen, textile, gifting and everyday-carry products.

Pet as family

APPA’s $165B projection covers the overall pet economy, not giftware. Etsy pet searches support an occasion-led test; keep personalization and price choice central. About 22% of owners reported lower pet spending in 2025, so avoid assuming a premium upsell. [15]

WHAT DESERVES A PITCH

A short, coherent collection with one hero story, a good/better price ladder and a product format that gives the license a reason to exist. For Fall 2027 and Atlanta meetings, begin rights, category, territory and production checks now.

06 / BLACK FRIDAY AND CYBER MONDAY

More deal windows, more reasons to compare

Retailers are stretching promotions across several weeks; dates and access rules vary by retailer.

The dates below reflect public announcements available as of Nov. 2, 2026. Doorbusters, early access and discount depth differ by retailer and may change.

Retailer	Confirmed / announced calendar	Status and practical watch
Target	Deal of the Day runs Nov. 1–Dec. 24. Early Black Friday sale Nov. 5–7, with daily deals beginning Nov. 1. [20]	Confirmed by Target. Focus on current gift assortment and exclusives; not every deal is giftware.
Kohl's	Early Access Nov. 6–8; Black Friday Week Nov. 22–28; Cyber Deals Nov. 29–30. [23]	Gift, home, apparel and tech discounts; gift-with-purchase and Kohl's Cash may shape value framing.
Best Buy	Early deals begin Nov. 6 with new offers each Friday; 10 days of Black Friday deals begin Nov. 19; Cyber Week Dec. 1–6. [22]	Consider licensed tech and gift-ready add-ons. Stores are closed Thanksgiving.
The Home Depot	Black Friday Savings Event Nov. 5–25, including holiday décor, tools, appliances and home upgrades. [26]	Home décor offers sit within a broader project and holiday basket.
Lowe's	Four weeks of Black Friday deals began Oct. 29; 12 Days of Deals start Nov. 16; largest savings Thanksgiving week. [25]	Early deal period is underway; seasonal décor, pets and home/gifting categories are in the mix.
Walmart	Early Black Friday Nov. 12–15; Black Friday Nov. 23–29; Cyber Monday Nov. 30–Dec. 2. [21]	Walmart+ has first access on select drops; value-priced gifts are emphasized.
Amazon	Black Friday Nov. 27; Cyber Monday Nov. 30. The public page described early deals but had not published the full 2026 event schedule. [24]	Only announced dates are listed; the early-deal schedule remained unconfirmed as of Nov. 2.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR AGENCIES AND LICENSEES Retailers are spreading price events across several weeks and adding loyalty or member access. Prepare retailer-specific creative and product feeds before each event. Make value legible without reducing every product story to a discount; monitor placements, exclusives and gift categories across retailers.

Black Friday falls on Nov. 27, 2026, and Cyber Monday on Nov. 30. Retailer announcements—not prior-year calendars—set this season's event dates, access and discount details.

07 / AI, CREATIVE MARKETING AND DIGITAL READINESS

Discovery is changing. The content still has to earn trust.

AI is appearing in retailer discovery, recommendations and creative production. Clear product information and human review still matter.

AI can speed discovery and production when people shape the idea. Target reported AI-driven traffic to its site up 2,000% year over year in Q1, versus nearly 400% growth for retail sites overall. These are company-reported traffic figures, not sales or conversion results. Target has also introduced Ask Target, an AI shopping assistant in beta. [20]



Creating product imagery for an online listing. Photo: PNW Production / Pexels.

What retail evidence says about AI

UserTesting surveyed 89 senior retail leaders and 1,107 shoppers in the U.S. and key EU markets. Sixty-nine percent of retail CX teams said at least half of AI-powered experiences needed substantial revision after launch. Retail teams used AI more to summarize research (66%) than to create prototypes or visual assets (36%). Speed still needs testing and editing. [28]

Google reports that BarkleyOKRP and The Salvation Army used AI to turn recently sold thrift inventory into locally tailored ads. Its case study reports $11 per store visit and 2.6× the Display Network benchmark click-through rate in the first 30 days; these are vendor-reported results, not an independent audit. [29]

NIQ/World Data Lab reports nearly 75% of consumers use AI during product discovery; UserTesting found 14.9% of surveyed shoppers named AI assistants as a starting point. Different samples and questions make these figures non-comparable; neither represents a universal share of holiday purchases. [27] [28]

BALANCED CREATIVE IMPLICATION Use AI to explore routes, create approved format variations, summarize reviews or adapt rights-cleared assets. People should decide the insight, visual point of view, brand fit, accuracy, licensing scope and final approval.

Digital asset readiness

Area	Required / verified	Optional or emerging
Listing images	Amazon requires a high-quality actual product photo on pure white for the main image, with no watermarks or overlays; category exceptions exist. It recommends more than four images and 1,000px+ sizing for zoom. [30]	Lifestyle, detail, package, scale images and short video are useful where retailer specs allow.
Video / 3D / AR	No universal giftware mandate for video, 3D, AR or digital twins was identified in retailer guidance reviewed for this report.	Use category-specific assets where supported and the product benefits; confirm specs and cost with the buyer.
Product data	Identifiers, titles, attributes, dimensions, materials, availability and rights support reliable listings and retail feeds.	Structured data may support discovery; requirements vary by retailer and category.
AI disclosure	TikTok and YouTube require disclosure in relevant cases involving realistic AI-generated or meaningfully altered scenes. [31] [32]	Check each platform’s current policy and keep provenance and approvals with cutdowns.
DPP / 2D	EU passport rules are product-specific; textiles are planned for 2027 and furniture for 2028. GS1’s U.S. 2D barcode sunrise is a transition goal, not a universal QR-code mandate. [33] [34]	Prepare data for applicable categories and retailer programs while legacy UPC scanning continues.

PRACTICAL CHECKLIST Artists: approved high-resolution art, colorways, crop rights and provenance. Manufacturers: GTIN/SKU, attributes, dimensions, care, compliant hero and supporting imagery. Licensing teams: rights, talent permissions, retailer usage, expiration and AI terms. Clients: current destination specs, accessible captions, version control and documented approvals.

08 / FOOTPRINT, GLOBAL SIGNALS AND ATLANTA

Watch the shape of access, not a blanket closure story

Store changes matter for account access and assortment planning, but isolated closures do not establish a broad retail-demand trend.

Retail footprint watch	Verified change / timing	Account implication
Cato	About 70 additional underperforming stores were planned for Q3–Q4; total planned 2026 closures were about 120. The company described the plan as portfolio optimization across its chain. [35]	Refresh account and store lists. Do not generalize this chain's portfolio actions to gift and home retailers.
Leslie's	The Chapter 11 process began in late September/early October; 76 U.S. stores closed Sept. 29, while remaining stores continued to operate as the company evaluated its footprint. [36]	This specialty-pool retailer's court process and remaining store footprint are account-specific signals, not a broad consumer-goods indicator.
IKEA small formats	Annapolis and Colma Plan & Order Points closed Oct. 31; Fairfax was scheduled to close Nov. 30. These are planning/pickup locations, not full IKEA stores. [37]	IKEA continues delivery, pickup and online investment; the closures affect order points, not its overall U.S. presence.

A global channel signal

NIQ/World Data Lab reports nearly 60% of APAC consumers shop through social and quick-commerce channels, while 68% of surveyed North American consumers had never purchased through social media. Because the public release does not provide a full sample breakdown, the comparison is directional. For licensing, the implication is to adapt channel and product plans locally rather than export U.S. platform assumptions unchanged. [27]



Seasonal product display. Photo: Emre Akyol / Pexels.

Atlanta Market preparation

Winter Atlanta Market runs Jan. 12–17, 2027. Use buyer conversations to test price lanes, over-served styles, missing licensed or artist-led categories, personalization, digital asset deadlines and 2027 development windows. Treat show-floor conversations as qualitative signals and confirm patterns across buyers and sales data. [38]

Focused concepts, clear price points and a strong product story will make those conversations more useful.

A MONTHLY BRIEF FOR DECISIONS AHEAD The T.I.P. Report tracks retail, licensing, seasonal trends and practical AI, then translates the signals into questions for pitches and product planning. Artists can decide what to develop; licensing teams can assess property fit; manufacturers can sharpen a product story for buyers. Human creative judgment still guides fit, rights, price and timing.

To request the next issue, message Mary on LinkedIn with "The T.I.P. Report." For company information, visit imaginationnetwork.net. [39]

SOURCES

Sources and research notes

Public sources reviewed for the Holiday Edition. Select an entry to open its source.

[1] NRF — 2026 Holiday Sales Forecast, Oct. 15
[2] Circana — 2026 Holiday Purchase Intentions Study, Oct. 8
[3] PwC — Holiday Outlook 2026, Sept. 8
[4] Mastercard Economics Institute — Holiday report 2026
[5] NRF — Holiday consumer survey: affordability, Oct. 20
[6] NRF — 2026 holiday shopping trends, Oct. 28
[7] AP News — Q3 growth and inflation, Oct. 29
[8] Reuters — Voter economic mood ahead of midterms, Nov. 2
[9] Etsy — Fall/Winter 2026 Seller Trend Report, Oct. 14
[10] TikTok Newsroom — Holiday shopping signals, Sept./Oct. 2026
[11] Tailwind — Pinterest Trends data, U.S., week of Oct. 5 (secondary reporting)
[12] Faire — Holiday 2026 gift trends, Sept. 9
[13] Walmart — Christmas best sellers (live snapshot checked Nov. 2)
[14] Target — Christmas assortment (live snapshot checked Nov. 2)
[15] APPA — 2026 State of the Industry, March 26
[16] License Global — BEARPAW x Skyline, Nov. 2
[17] License Global — Paperblanks x New York Botanical Garden, Oct. 28
[18] License Global — Crocs Niles collectible plush, Oct. 28
[19] Licensing International — AI finding home in licensed tech, Oct. 30
[20] Target — Holiday gift assortment and AI shopping, Oct. 21
[21] Walmart — 2026 holiday deal calendar, Oct. 26
[22] Best Buy — Holiday deal calendar, Oct. 27
[23] Kohl's — November holiday savings events, Oct. 30
[24] Amazon — Black Friday 2026 information (event dates not yet published)
[25] Lowe's — Holiday lineup and four weeks of Black Friday deals, Oct. 8
[26] The Home Depot — Black Friday season begins, Oct. 29
[27] NIQ/World Data Lab — AI and the consumer purchase journey, Aug. 27
[28] UserTesting — 2026 State of AI in Retail Experiences
[29] Google — Salvation Army AI retail campaign case study, Apr. 2026
[30] Amazon Seller Central — Product image requirements
[31] TikTok — AI-generated content labeling policy
[32] YouTube — Disclosure of realistic AI-generated or altered content
[33] European Commission — Digital Product Passport FAQ
[34] GS1 US — Digital Link and 2027 2D barcode transition
[35] Cato Corporation — 2026 store closure plan, Sept. 18
[36] Leslie's — Chapter 11 and store closures, Sept. 30
[37] IKEA Annapolis Plan & Order Point — closure notice, Oct. 31
[38] Atlanta Market — Winter 2027 dates
[39] Imagination Network — public website
[40] Imagination Network — contact page
[41] Pinterest Trends — platform overview
[42] TikTok Creative Center — public creative and trend tools

RESEARCH LIMITS This analysis draws on public retailer and company newsrooms, investor and industry releases, NRF, Circana, PwC, Mastercard, APPA, licensing trade sources, Etsy, Faire, Pinterest and TikTok reporting, and live product pages. It does not include authenticated platform analytics, retailer seller portals or wholesale order data. Searches, platform conversations and public social posts are treated as directional unless a source reports transactions. Trend claims are labeled by channel, geography and measurement period where available.

Company announcements and case studies are labeled as company claims; survey intent is not sales; forecasts use different definitions; platform searches and retailer bestseller pages are directional unless a source reports transactions.