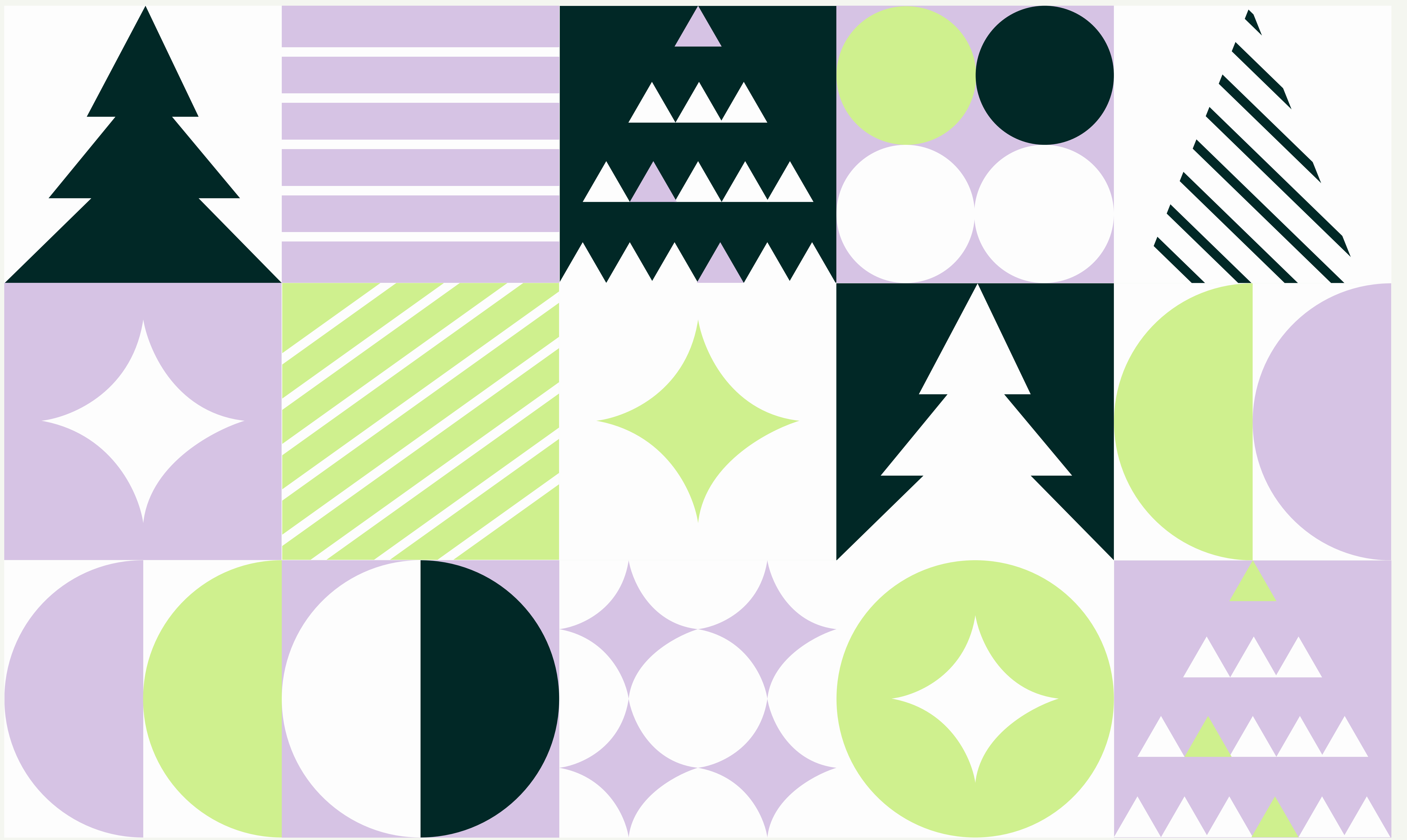




2026 Holiday Readiness Playbook for SMBs

How AI is rewriting the rules of holiday marketing and the actionable steps small business owners (SMBs) can take from September through November.

*An educational guide featuring insights from
Alicia Pringle, Senior Director of Online Marketing, Network Solutions*

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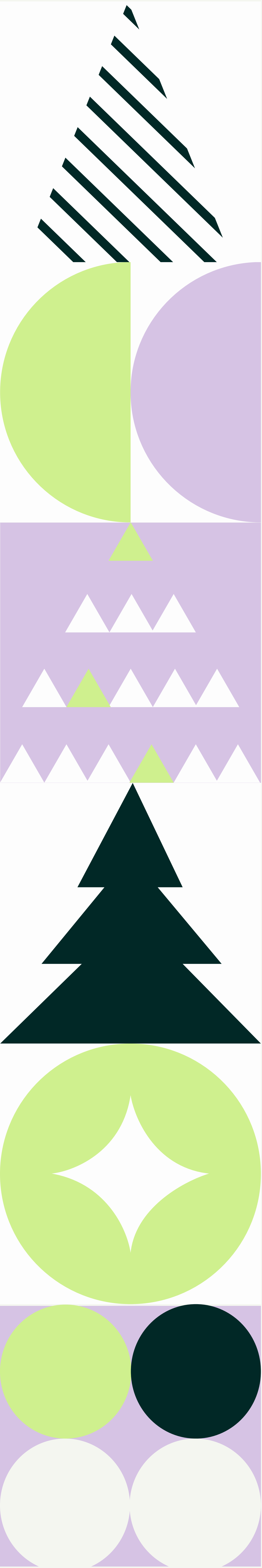
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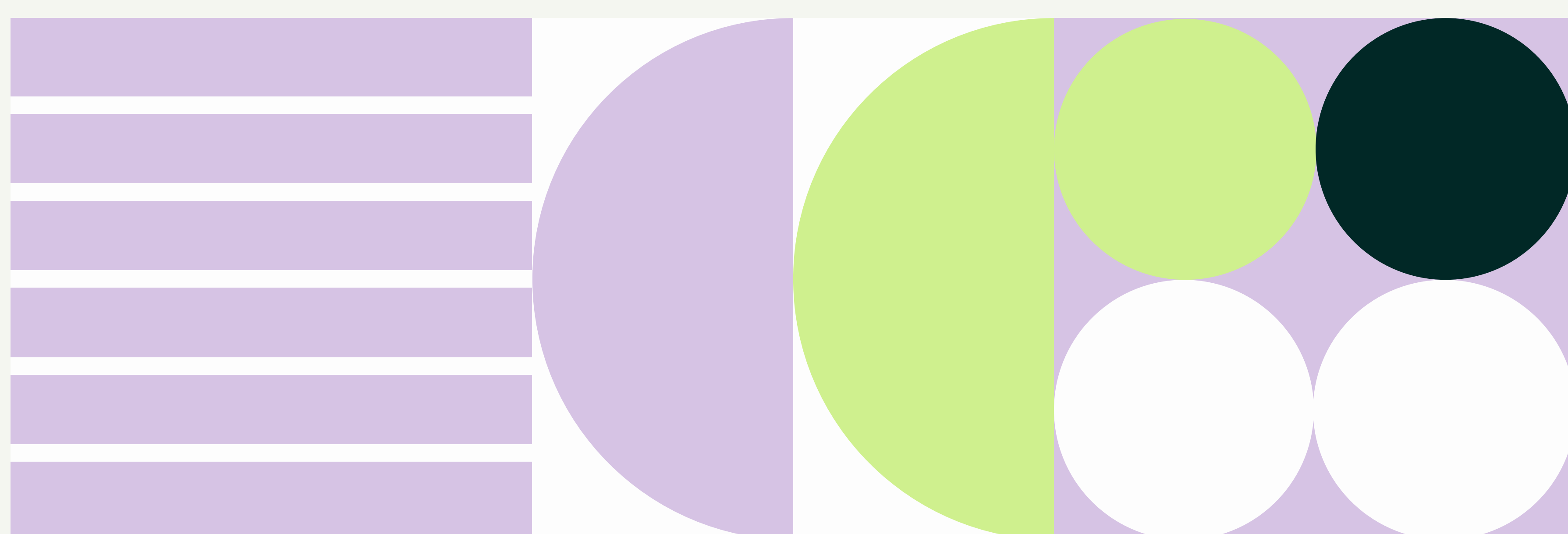
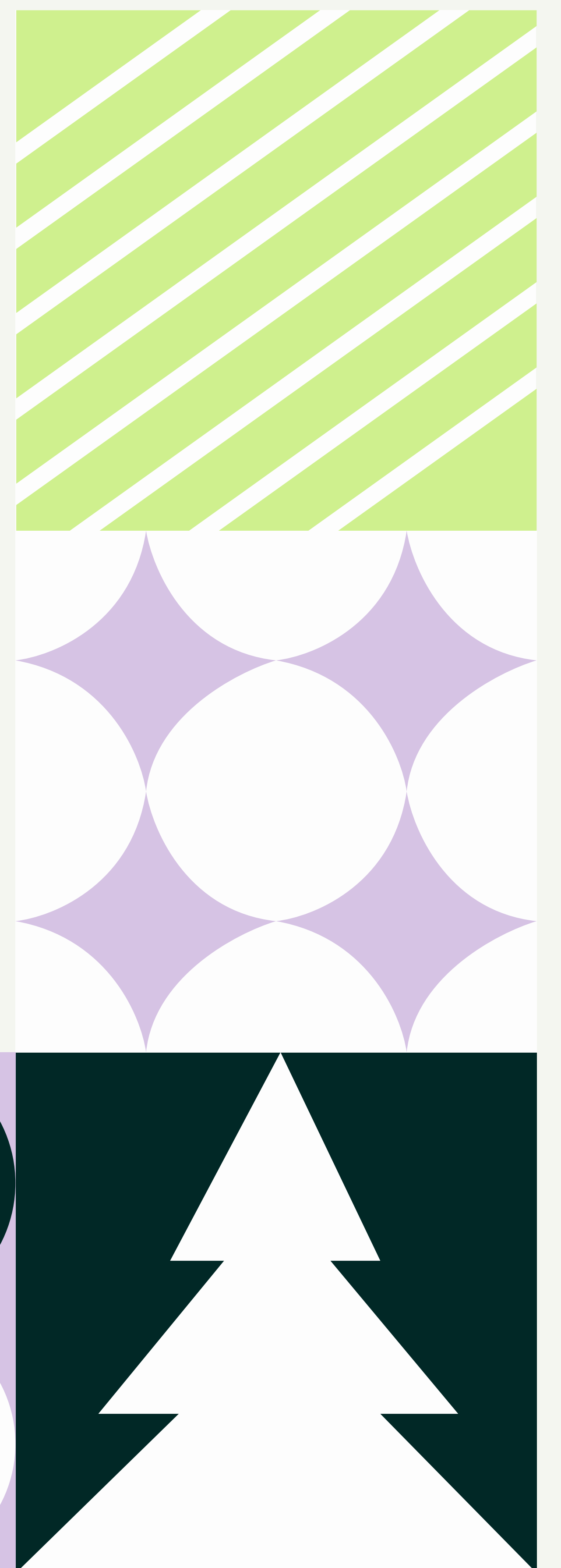
Holiday readiness has changed

Every year, the holiday season seems to sneak up a little faster than the last. But 2026 isn't just a repeat of "start early, know your audience, promote everywhere." The biggest shift is not a new platform nor an ad format. It's AI.

According to Alicia Pringle, Senior Director of Online Marketing at Network Solutions, the change is fundamental. Consumers didn't just dip a toe into AI this year—they moved from casual curiosity to actively using it to brainstorm, compare, and shop.

“AI is embedded in everything now—in Google, in Bing search, and in generative tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini. It's a little hard to avoid AI when shopping and doing product research online today.”

— Alicia Pringle, Senior Director of Online Marketing,
Network Solutions



That shift matters more for small businesses than almost anyone else, because it changes where and how customers first discover you. A shopper who used to scroll through pages of search results now often reads an AI summary first or skips search entirely and asks ChatGPT directly for a gift idea. If your website isn't structured for both AI and humans, you don't just rank lower; you'll be invisible entirely.

This playbook is built to go further than "be present everywhere." It tells you what actually changed, what still works, and a specific, month-by-month checklist you can start using in September. You don't need to be a Network Solutions customer to get value from this guide, but if you are, you'll see exactly where our tools fit into the plan.





Why the 2026 holiday season will be different

Here are a few numbers that set the stage for this season:

68%

of U.S. consumers reported using at least one AI tool in the past three months (McKinsey 2026 ConsumerWise)

17%

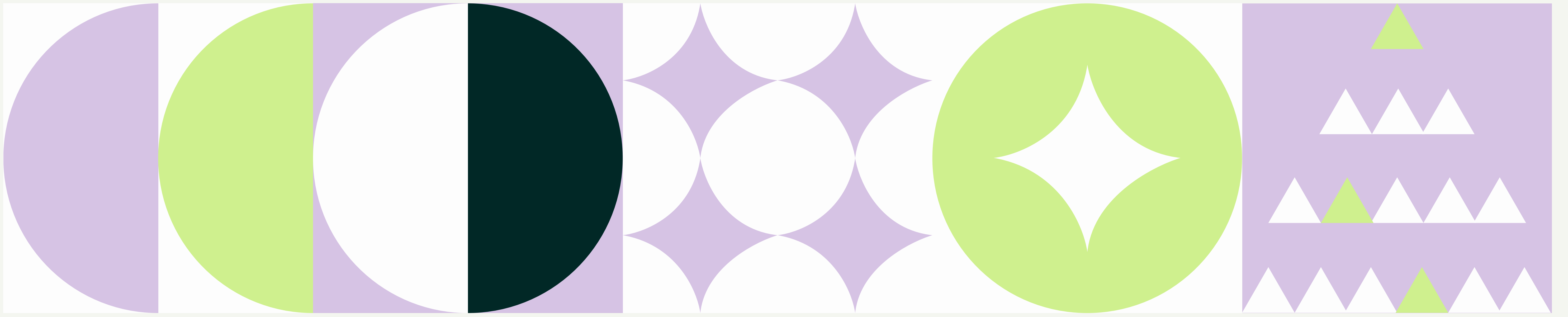
of consumers specifically plan to use AI for holiday shopping this year—deals, gift ideas, and comparisons (Basis)

~60%

say they're still primarily browsing, comparing, and searching the traditional way

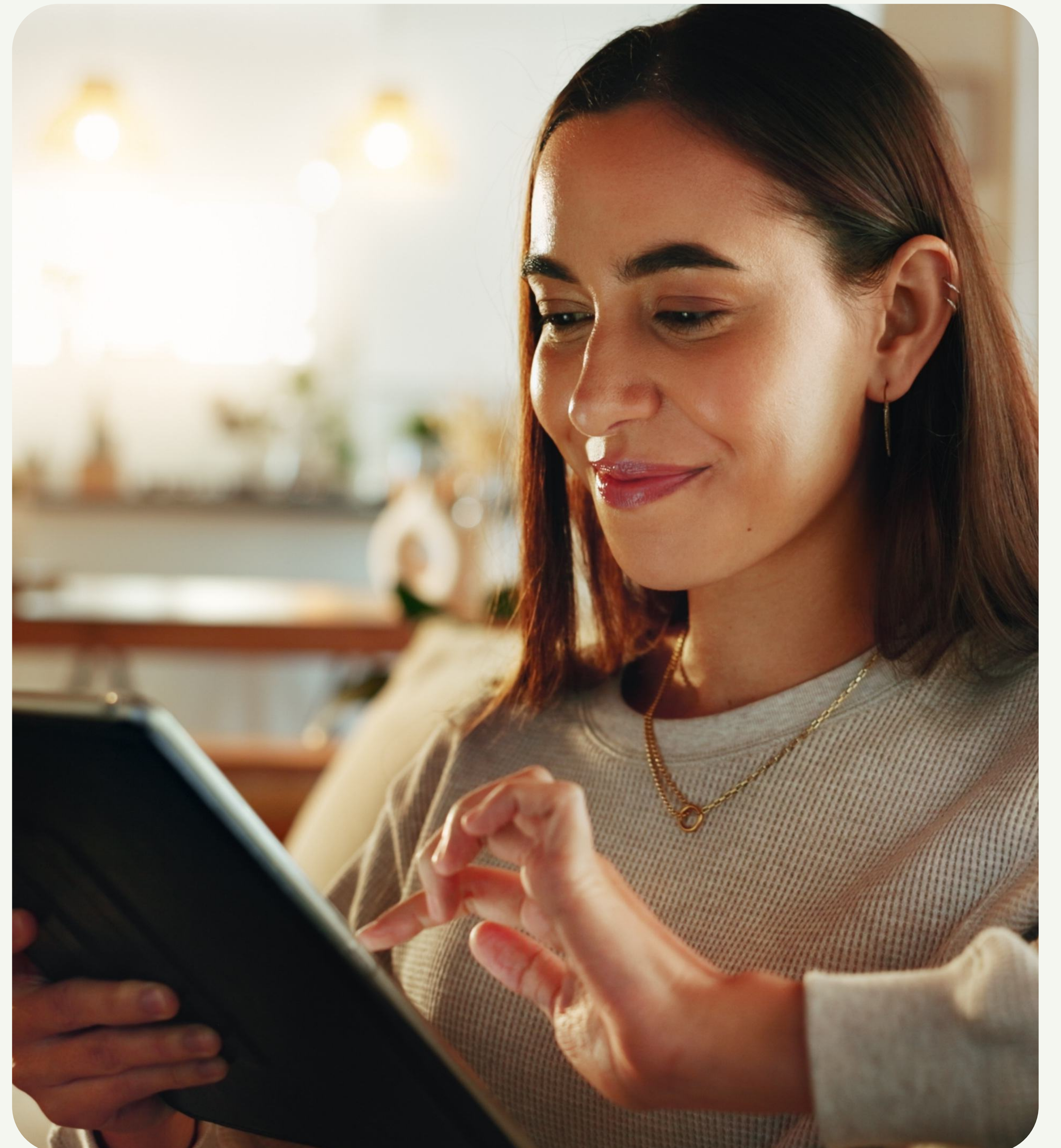
Looking at these statistics, it may be tempting to view AI-assisted shopping as separate from traditional search. But consumers no longer make that distinction. AI-powered experiences are increasingly embedded into the search tools people already use, making AI a natural part of how shoppers discover and evaluate products. You can't choose between optimizing for AI search or traditional search this year; you need both.





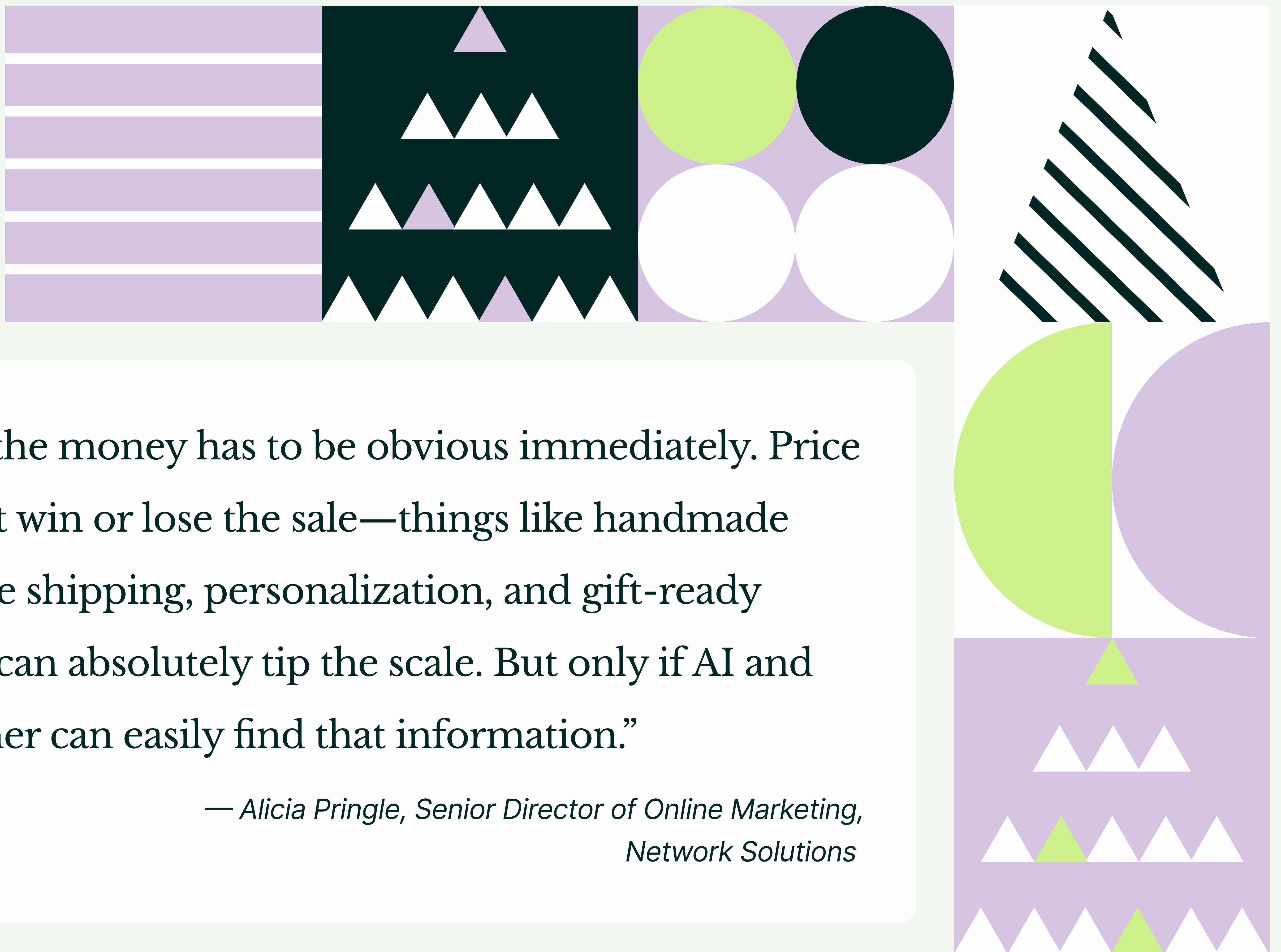
AI-powered shopping is now mainstream

Think about how a shopper researched gifts a year ago: they Google a phrase like "gifts for dad" and scroll through pages of results until something looked right. This year, that same shopper might still start on Google—but they'll likely read the AI overview at the top of the page first, and may even engage with it, answering follow-up questions about dad's hobbies (does he garden? play baseball?) to get tailored suggestions. Some shoppers are skipping Google altogether and going straight to ChatGPT, describing a gift recipient in a sentence or two and getting specific, curated ideas, sometimes with direct purchase links, in a fraction of the time it used to take. Even budget-conscious shoppers are using AI to compare products faster based on price, reviews, shipping, and gift fit.



The practical implication: your website's content increasingly needs to answer questions an AI tool is going to ask on a shopper's behalf.

Most shoppers are budget-conscious this year, and AI is making comparison shopping faster and more precise. Instead of opening a dozen browser tabs, a shopper can now ask something like, "What's a thoughtful gift under \$50 for a mom who loves gardening that arrives before December 20th?" All at once, they'll get a response that compares prices, reviews, shipping speed, and gift fit.



“Value for the money has to be obvious immediately. Price alone won't win or lose the sale—things like handmade quality, free shipping, personalization, and gift-ready packaging can absolutely tip the scale. But only if AI and the customer can easily find that information.”

— *Alicia Pringle, Senior Director of Online Marketing, Network Solutions*



Sources

- “Holiday 2026 Will Feel Different”: From AI to Consumer Behavior, Retail Experts Weigh in on What to Expect — *Retail TouchPoints*
- Shopping Gets an AI Assist — *McKinsey & Company*
- 2026 Holiday Pulse Report — *Salsify*
- Brand Building in the AI Age Report — *The Trade Desk*



How holiday marketing and discovery are changing in the age of AI

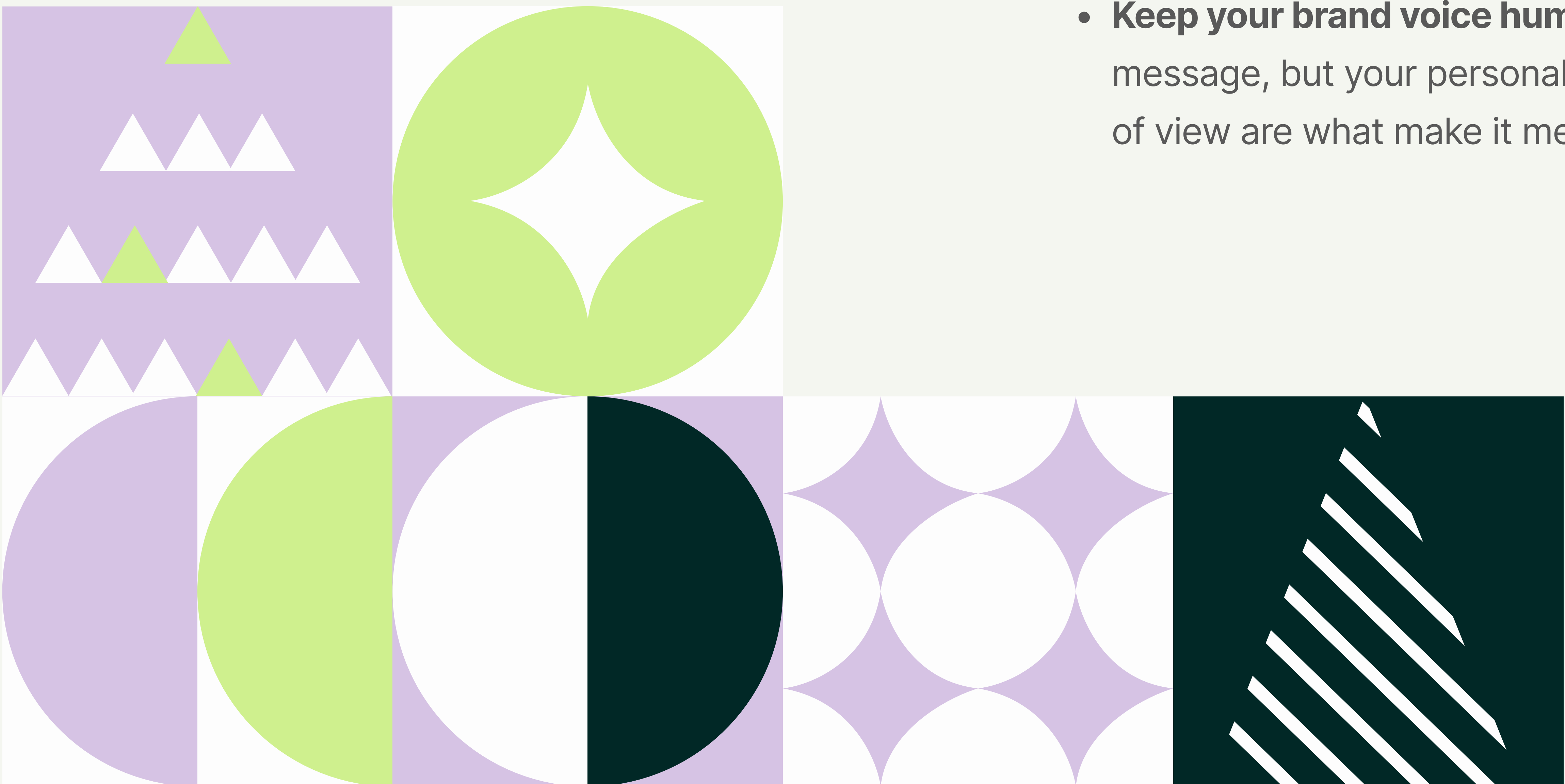
What still works

Some fundamentals haven't changed:

- **Know your audience:** AI has raised the bar for how specifically you need to show that you understand their needs.
- **Strengthen local visibility:** A complete, accurate [Google Business Profile](#) remains essential for both traditional and AI-powered search.

What needs to change

- **Stop chasing content volume:** Posting more often does not automatically make your marketing stronger. AI has made it easier than ever to produce content, which also means there is more noise to compete with.
- **Focus on usefulness:** Create content that answers a specific question, solves a problem, or helps a shopper make a decision.
- **Use AI to move faster:** Lean on it for topic ideas, first drafts, and marketing planning so you can spend more time refining what matters.
- **Keep your brand voice human:** AI can help shape the message, but your personality, expertise, and point of view are what make it memorable.





Use AI without sounding like AI

The brands that stand out this season use AI for speed but still sound like themselves. Generic AI phrasing is easy to spot. Both shoppers and AI search tools respond better to specific, human detail than to polished, generic copies.

TRY THIS

After AI drafts something, add one detail it could never invent on its own—a specific product name, a real customer's question, an inside joke about your shop. If you can't point to at least one sentence that only you could have written, revise before you publish it.

AI-assisted execution

Working faster with AI, without losing what makes your marketing sound like you.

Use AI to work smarter, not just produce more

A lot of businesses use AI to generate more content: more posts, more emails, more copies. That's not the win. The win is using AI to finish in 15 minutes what used to take the whole afternoon, so you have time left over for the one or two things that actually move the needle this season.

TRY THIS

Take your best-performing piece of content from last year. It could be a popular email, post, or product page. Ask an AI tool to turn it into a first draft of your top three holiday assets: a gift guide, a week of email subject lines, and five social captions. Then edit. Don't publish AI's first draft as-is—see the next move.



AI-driven discovery

Making sure AI search tools and shopping assistants actually find and recommend you.



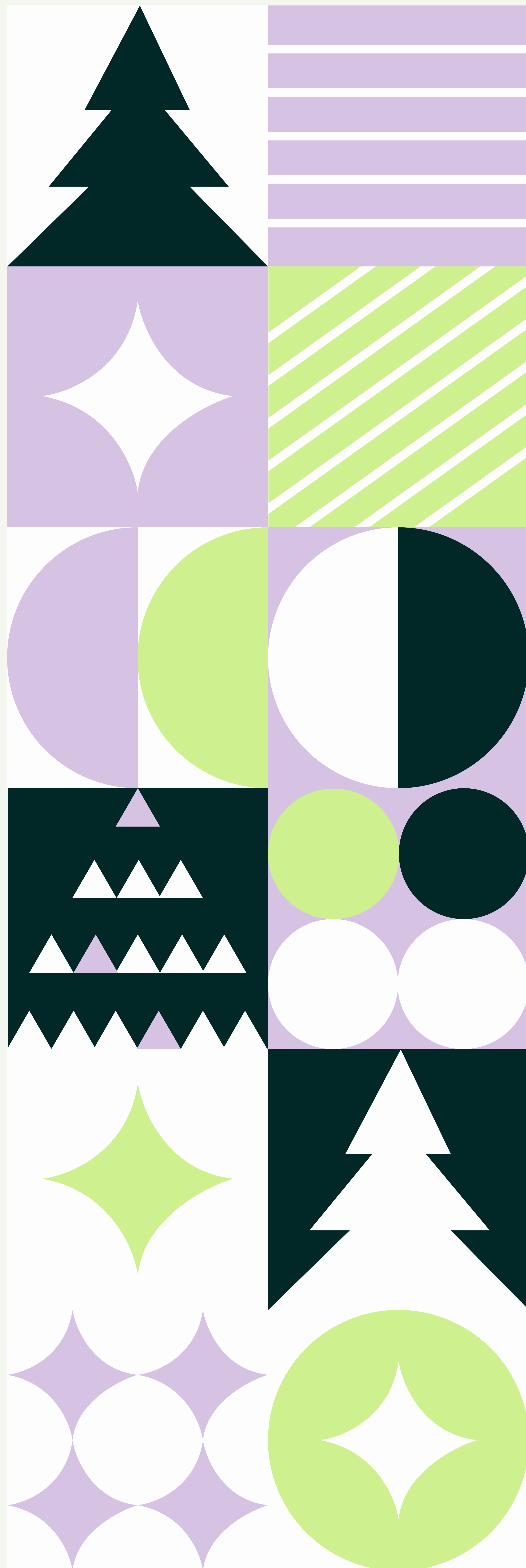
Improve visibility in AI-powered search

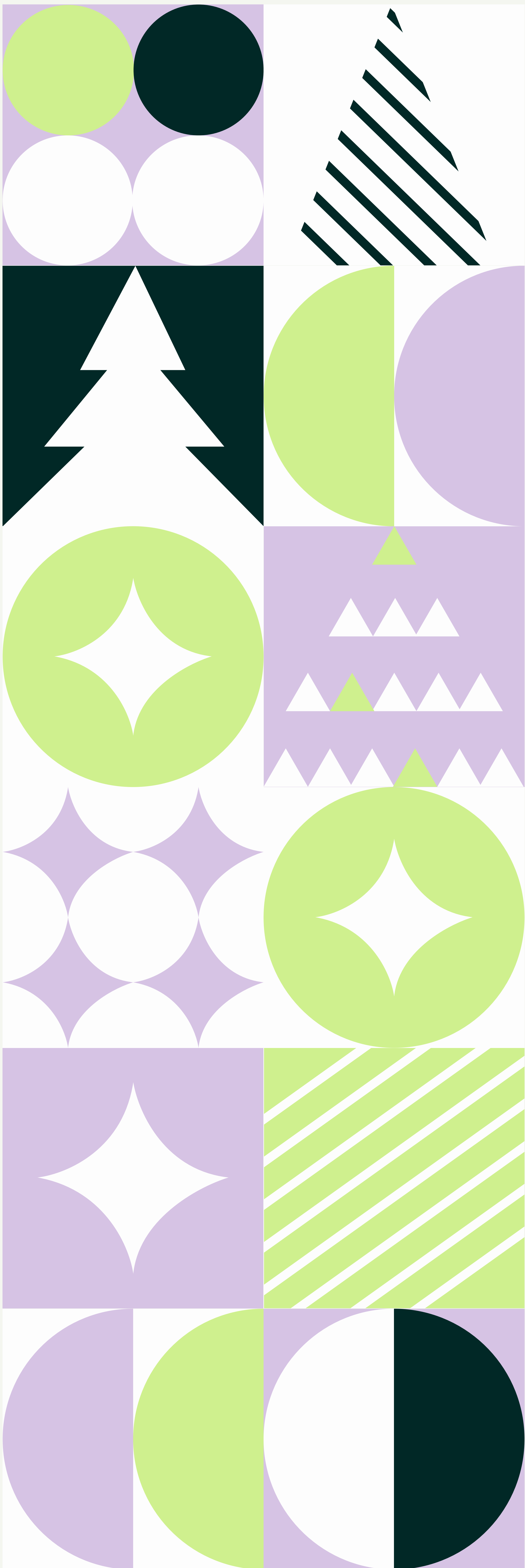
AI shopping tools pull from the same signals traditional search does. However, instead of only looking for matching keywords, they may use information from places like your website, Google Business Profile, and customer reviews to understand what you offer and whether it fits the shopper's request.

TRY THIS

Pick your top three product or service pages. For each, check: does it clearly answer who it's for, what's included, and when it arrives or how to get it? Then confirm your Google Business Profile hours, holiday updates, and photos are current. Fix whichever one is weakest first.

Two patterns worth knowing: Keyword-rich, specific product descriptions consistently perform better in AI search than vague marketing copy, and large language models tend to favor genuine user reviews and UGC over polished branded copy when forming an opinion of a business.





Make product and service information more specific

Give shoppers and AI the details they need: what it is, who it's for, price, availability, and delivery or turnaround time.



Help shoppers understand why they should choose you

When an AI assistant is comparing you to five competitors, or a shopper is scrolling between browser tabs, the businesses that win make their value obvious in one glance.

TRY THIS

Write a single sentence that answers “why us” and put it somewhere prominent. It can be your homepage, the top of a gift guide, or your email signature this season. Back it with one proof point: a review quote, a guarantee, or a specific number.



Holiday content SMBs can actually create

Time is premium for small business owners, especially solo entrepreneurs. The good news is that you don't need to produce content for every channel separately. One well-built piece of content can be repurposed across nearly all of them.

The highest-leverage format: The gift guide

A focused holiday gift guide is one of the most underrated pieces of content an SMB can create.

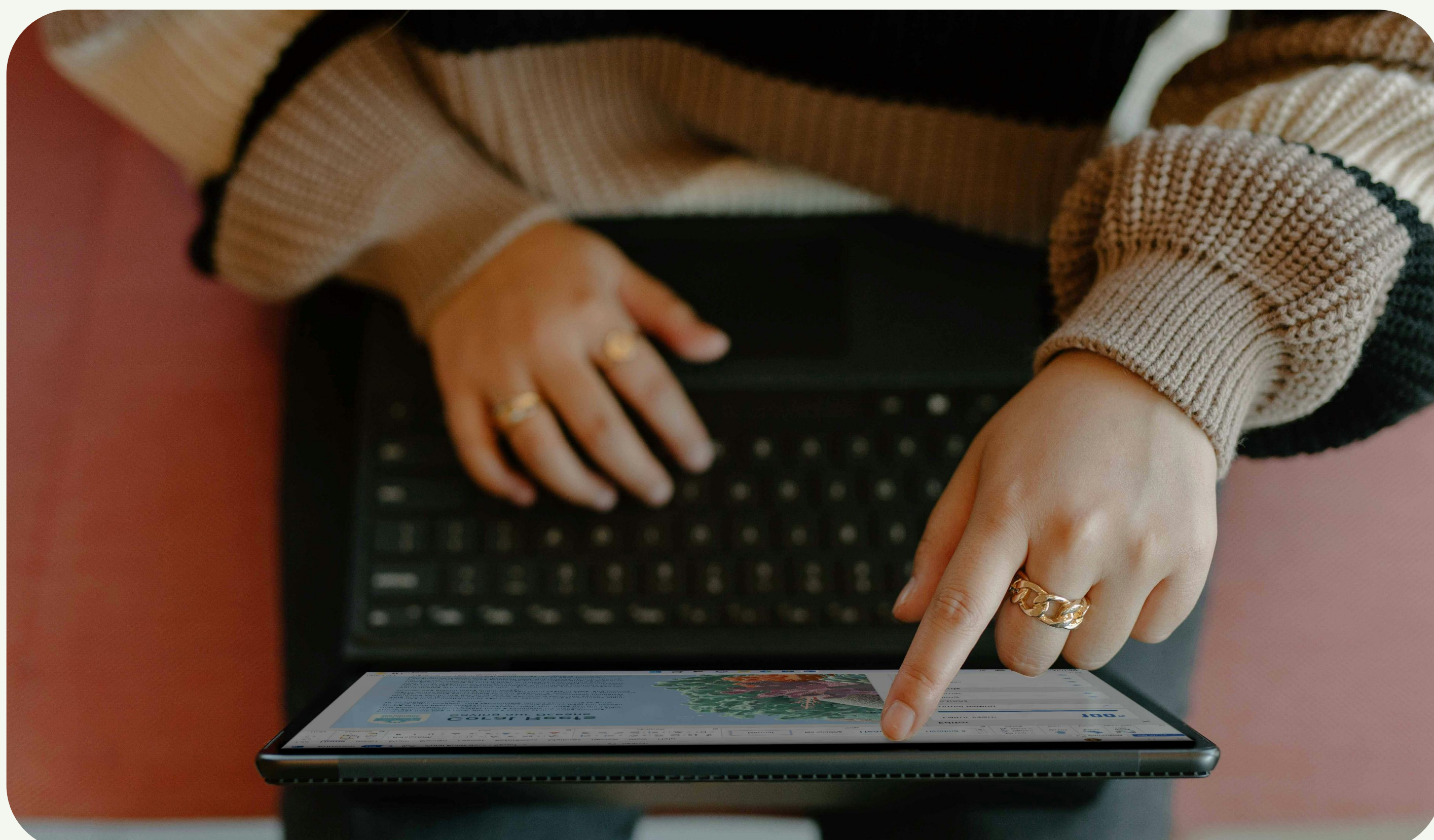
A single guide like that can become:

- A series of Instagram posts, one product at a time
- An email series sent across two to three weeks
- A short video walkthrough of the featured products
- Core website content and blog content
- In-store signage, if you have a physical location

Invest the time upfront in one strong idea, then reuse it deliberately across channels instead of creating something new for each one.

Other content worth prioritizing

- **Gift-finding content:** Curated picks by recipient, occasion, or budget
- **Product and service content:** Specific, detailed descriptions written the way your customers actually search
- **Trust-building content:** Reviews, testimonials, behind-the-scenes/origin story content
- **Purchase-support content:** Shipping cutoffs, return policies, FAQs that remove hesitation at checkout
- **Personalized holiday content:** Gift ideas tied to specific hobbies, interests, or recipients, mirroring how AI tools already personalize suggestions



AI tools worth using

- ChatGPT
- Google Gemini
- Claude
- Canva
- Google Workspace AI tools
- Network Solutions AI All-Access Pack



Common holiday planning mistakes to avoid

The biggest mistake SMBs make every holiday season is treating November like the starting line. Holiday shopping momentum now builds in September—waiting until November means reacting instead of executing.

- **Starting too late to test what works:** By the time most businesses feel ready, they've already lost weeks of momentum.
- **Relying on generic or unedited AI-generated content:** It reads as polished but forgettable.
- **Focusing only on traditional search:** [AI search](#) is now part of the discovery journey.
- **Using vague product or service information:** Both shoppers and AI tools need specifics, and missing (or even incorrect) specs, sizing, pricing, or availability details makes it harder for shoppers to decide and for AI tools to summarize accurately.
- **Promoting everywhere without adapting content to the channel:** The same exact message doesn't work identically everywhere.
- **Leaving shipping, availability, or returns unclear:** Buyers looking for this information are already closest to finalizing a purchase decision, and missing out here is one of the fastest ways to lose a sale—or disappear from an AI answer.

“The one thing I consistently see businesses leave too late every year is updating their website, Google Business Profile, and social media with the actually critical details shoppers need—why your products are different, shipping cutoff dates, local pickup options, and holiday promos. Don't keep customers guessing. Don't keep AI search tool responses guessing, either.”

— Alicia Pringle, Senior Director of Online Marketing,
Network Solutions

Starting from scratch

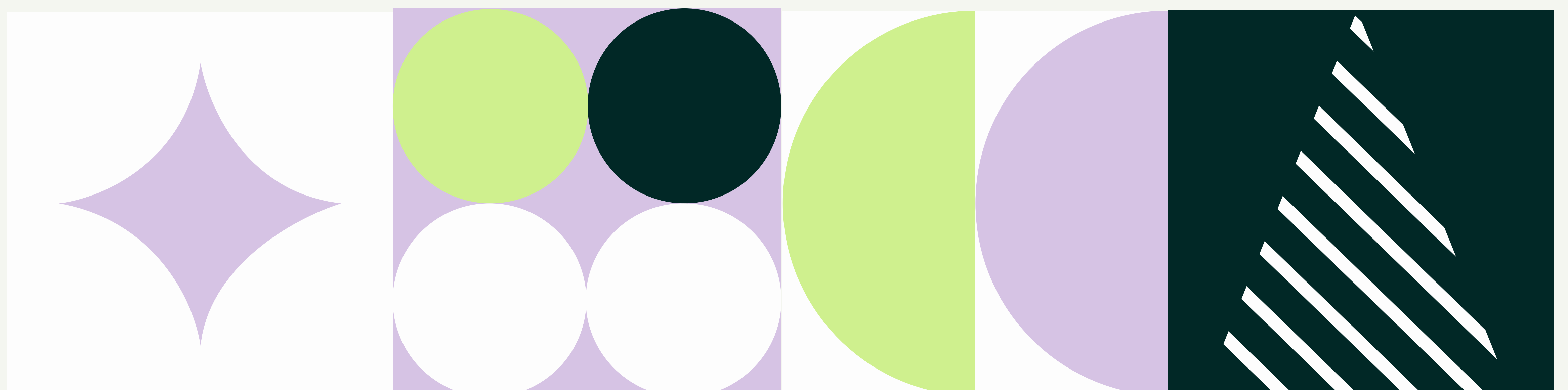
Not every reader has an established online presence yet and that's okay. Here's where to start without trying to build everything an established business already has in place.

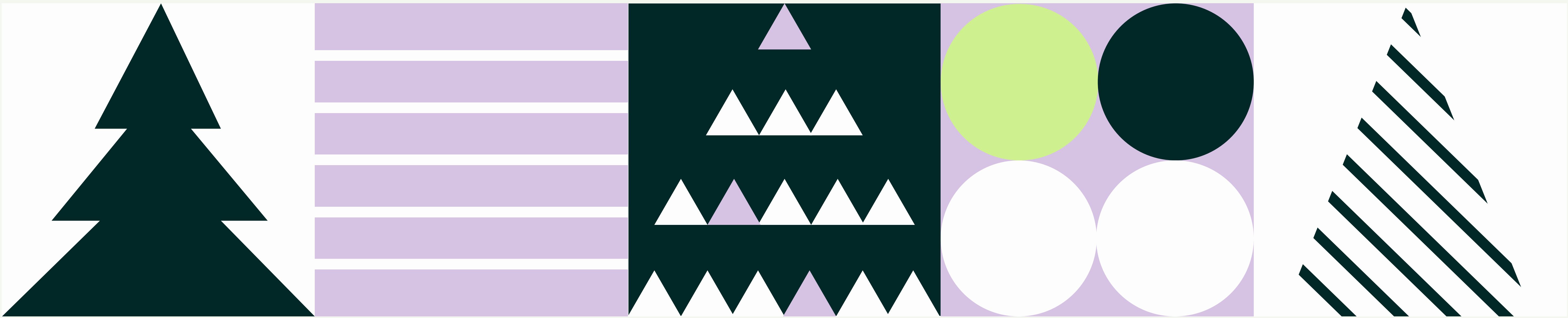
- **A domain that's clearly yours:** Secure a clear, memorable domain name first—to serve as the online address that customers and AI tools will point to.
- **A simple business website:** Publish a few pages with clear information on what you sell, who it's for, pricing, and how to buy.
- **Essential product or service pages:** Make them specific enough for a customer, or an AI assistant, to understand your offer at a glance.
- **Easy-to-find contact and purchase information:** Include a visible phone number, email, or chat option, and a clear path to checkout, so customers and AI tools both know how to complete the sale.
- **Key local or business profiles:** Start with a Google Business Profile (at minimum,) if you want to be visible to local customers searching for your products and services (eg “restaurants near me”).
- **Secure payment options:** Offer a trusted way to accept payments to build confidence for both customers and AI tools recommending you.
- **Basic channels to promote and measure activity:** Start with a simple contact list, a content calendar, and a way to post consistently and engage potential customers.



“Start with clarity, not perfection. You don't need a 10-page marketing strategy. You just need one customer to understand you and feel confident buying from you.”

— Alicia Pringle, Senior Director of Online Marketing, Network Solutions





The 2026 holiday timeline: September to November action plan

Here's the checklist version of everything in this guide, broken down by month. September is about foundation, October is about visibility, and November is about execution.

September: Lock down the foundation

Make sure your digital foundation should be fully in place before the rush, not during.

- ☐ Website is live, updated, and reflects current products, pricing, and inventory
- ☐ At least one holiday offer or bundle is decided
- ☐ Local listings are current (Google Business Profile, Yelp, industry directories)
- ☐ Shipping cutoff dates and inventory/stock availability information are posted
- ☐ Set time aside to check-in on product and business reviews

Read more: [Our September holiday marketing guide](#)

October: Build visibility

Shift from foundation to getting found. Content and visibility take center stage.

- ☐ Website content strategy is in motion (product pages, FAQs, blog content)
- ☐ [Email marketing](#) / newsletter campaigns are set up and scheduled
- ☐ Social and/or search ad campaigns are configured, if running paid promotion
- ☐ Gift guide content is created and ready to repurpose
- ☐ Awareness-building activity is ramping up

Read more: [Our October holiday marketing guide](#)

The one thing businesses always leave too late

Updating the specific, critical details shoppers and AI tools rely on to decide: why your products are different, shipping cutoffs, pickup options, and current holiday promos.

November: Execute and convert

Heading into Thanksgiving, Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday, the work should already be done.

- ☐ Marketing campaigns are live and running consistently
- ☐ Social posting is regular and on-schedule
- ☐ Any ad campaigns are active and being monitored
- ☐ Shipping deadlines and inventory notices are clearly visible
- ☐ Analytics are being checked regularly

Read more: [Our November holiday marketing guide](#)

Make it easy to choose you

AI can help small businesses execute faster and become easier to discover this holiday season. But it doesn't replace the fundamentals. Holiday success still depends on clear value, real trust, useful information, and a strong digital foundation.

“If a business is going to remember one thing from this guide, it's this: make it very easy to choose you. Whether someone finds you through AI, through Google search, through social, or through word of mouth, they're really asking the same question—Is this for me? Can I trust it? Is it worth it? What do I do next? Your job is to make those answers obvious.”

— Alicia Pringle, Senior Director of Online Marketing,
Network Solutions

A myth worth retiring in 2026

More effort doesn't automatically mean better results. Holiday marketing isn't a quantity contest. You win by knowing your customers, being clear and useful for them, and doing a smaller number of things really well.

Where to start

Whether you're locking in a domain for the first time, refreshing a website that hasn't been touched since last November, or exploring how AI-assisted tools can save you hours of content work this season, [Network Solutions](#) has the tools to support you in every stage of this playbook.

Start with September and be ready to break through for the 2026 Holiday Season.

