

Practical guide: Stand out during the Dubai Shopping Festival

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Why festival shoppers rarely come back

Dubai Mall has more than 100 million visitors a year and more than 1,200 shops. The Dubai Shopping Festival runs for 45 days, from 4 December 2026 to 17 January 2027. Many of those shops will run festival discounts. YouGov reported in October 2026 that 60% of UAE residents plan to shop at the festival.

Customers who first buy in a big sale come back less often than others. Ometria, a UK customer data company, looked at its own fashion, beauty, lifestyle and speciality retail clients. Of the customers whose first purchase was on Black Friday 2024, 4% bought again within 12 months. Other new customers came back about six times as often.

Through my own experience

When I was at Emaar, retailers at The Dubai Mall often told me the footfall was not reaching their store. The mall brought people through the doors. Each store still had to give a shopper a reason to stop, and a reason to come back.

This guide is for one store in a busy mall during a festival. Keeping customers starts before the first sale, because the reason a person came in decides whether they return.



What has changed for a store in 2026

Four findings from the last two years, from the UAE and the US. Each one changes where a single store should put its money for the festival.

Shoppers choose before they arrive

In a Google and Ipsos study of 8,465 US holiday shoppers, people searched online before 92% of store visits. In a Mastercard survey of more than 1,000 UAE adults, published in December 2025, 89% read reviews before buying and 88% compare prices across retailers.

UAE shoppers wait for the sale

In the same Mastercard survey, 74% do most of their holiday shopping on major sale days, and 81% wait for an item they want to go on sale. A store that wins them with a discount has taught them to wait for the next one.

This winter depends on local shoppers

Visitor numbers are rising again. Dubai had 869,000 international visitors in August 2026, its highest month since February. The total from January to August was 6.97 million, against 19.59 million in the whole of 2025, so I expect stores to rely heavily on residents and shoppers from the region this festival. Those customers can come back next month, which makes the second purchase easier to win. In a 2025 Nielsen survey of 750 Dubai residents for Al Ghurair Centre, 76% of mall visits were between 5pm and midnight.

Few customers feel recognised

Only 18% of 2,000 US consumers in the Merkle Loyalty Barometer 2026 said brands recognise them consistently. Adyen's 2025 UAE report found that 55% of UAE consumers say loyalty programmes ask too much time, effort or data.



Three numbers and the data behind them

Set the definitions before the festival opens and keep them, so this year can be compared with next.

Contact capture rate	The share of sales where the customer joined your list and agreed to hear from you
Second purchase within 90 days	Of the customers who first bought during the festival, the share who bought again within 90 days
Revenue from returning customers	The share of each month's sales from customers who had bought from you before

Benchmarks from B&S Co, based on 156,110 customers of online brands in 2024 and reported by Eightx in May 2026, show 76.4% of repeat orders came within 90 days of the first. The data is from online stores, but it points to the weeks just after the festival as the time to win the second purchase.



Build the customer profile from behaviour

The aim is to understand why each customer bought, so the next offer fits their need. Most of the data comes from the transaction itself, and none of it needs a question at the till.

Basket	Category, brand, price band and any add-on service taken
Purchase mission	Gift or own use, read from a gift-wrap or engraving request
Source	The creator, partner, ad or listing code that brought them in
Offer response	Whether a service, a preview or a price offer made them act
Value and frequency	Spend, number of visits and time since the last purchase

Interests and dates come later, from customers who choose to complete their own profile at home.

THROUGH MY OWN EXPERIENCE

Transaction data only becomes useful once it is segmented. Two customers with the same spend in the same department store, one buying baby clothes and one buying a watch, sit in different need states, meaning they buy for different reasons, and respond to different offers. Segmenting by recency, frequency and value, then by category affinity and purchase mission, gives a store customer groups with shared buying patterns that it can target with relevant offers.

Before shoppers reach the mall

Position the offer against your whole competitive set

In my experience, a shopper choosing between Dubai Mall, Mall of the Emirates and City Centre Deira for the same discount goes to the nearest. A 30% discount matches the discount next door and is paid entirely from your margin. A value-added service is harder to copy and leaves the shelf price intact.

THROUGH MY OWN EXPERIENCE

During festivals in Dubai I brought in personalisation specialists to create one-off pieces on bags and trainers, free with a higher-value purchase. The fixed cost was offset by the extra sales it drove, and it gave the store a proposition no competitor in the mall could match.

The Perfume Shop in the UK engraved 21,000 bottles over Christmas 2025, and gift wrap orders rose 84.6% (KamCity, January 2026).

Get listed where AI tools look

72% of UAE residents surveyed planned to rely on AI tools for last season's mega sales, including the festival (YouGov, 1,006 respondents, August 2025). AI assistants draw on what is published about a store across the web. Publish a festival page on your website with the offer, dates, price and unit location in plain text. Make sure the same facts appear on your Google Business Profile, the festival listing and any press coverage. My guide *Get your business mentioned by AI tools* sets out the steps.

The festival listing and the mall's own channels

Register your promotion through DET Connect. Last season, shoppers spending AED 300 or more in a participating store could scan the official festival QR code for a weekly car draw (Gulf Today, December 2025).

Malls hold large, well-built customer lists and send festival notifications and newsletters. In my experience, they avoid filling them with near-identical discounts. Pitch your service-led offer to the mall's marketing team with a strong image, and it has a far better chance of being selected.

Press round-ups and creators

In last season's coverage, What's On and Khaleej Times published deal lists days before each sale, and most named malls and categories. Few named a single store. Send editors a ready-to-use item a week ahead. Invite six to ten local creators to a preview in the week before the festival opens. Since 1 February 2026 a brand must check each creator holds a UAE Media Council advertiser permit, including for gifted posts (Gulf News, February 2026).

Google and loyalty schemes

80% of people in the UAE use Google Maps or Waze to find local businesses and 86% check Google reviews (Google and Public First, via Gulf News, June 2025). At Dubai Mall, shoppers earn Emirates Skywards Miles on receipts of AED 100 or more uploaded in the mall app. SHARE and AI-Futtaim's Blue Rewards also reward receipt scans. Say so on the shopfront and in every listing.

Inside the mall, during the festival

Offer a quieter experience at quieter times

76% of Dubai mall visits fall between 5pm and midnight (Nielsen for Al Ghurair Centre, 2025). Some shoppers want festival offers but avoid the crowds. Position weekday mornings as a calmer, more personal experience with private appointments and previews, and hold launches then, when fewer events compete for attention.

Plan operations for peak conversion

Increase staffing levels and service capacity from 5pm, and size any free service so it is delivered at the time of purchase. Shoppers will not come back the next day to collect it. Prepare best-sellers in advance where the service allows it, and use a digital queue on WhatsApp so a customer can browse nearby and return when their item is ready.

Keep the entrance clear for browsing, put the lead product and the service point in sight of the walkway, add mobile payment points to cut queues, and replenish and re-merchandise overnight.

Advertise to people near the mall

In Google Ads, set a small radius around the mall's address. Meta's smallest radius is about 1.6 km (1 mile), which in Dubai can take in more than one mall. Run ads in the afternoon, when shoppers plan their evening visit, and through the 5pm to midnight peak, name a landmark near the unit, and attach a code so each ad's store visits can be counted.

Take your proposition into the walkway

Promotional space in a busy walkway is expensive per square metre during the festival. A compact activation the mall wants on its floor can cost less than renting a promotional booth, and puts your brand where the footfall is.

THROUGH MY OWN EXPERIENCE

I placed London-style telephone boxes in high-footfall zones of the mall during the festival. Each box was linked to a participating brand, and a short interactive challenge rewarded visitors with an offer redeemable in that brand's store. The mall gained a distinctive attraction. Each brand gained awareness and footfall directed from shoppers who might never have passed its unit. Visitors had an experience they wanted to photograph.

I also converted vacant units into designed photo sets featuring retailers' products. Visitors' photographs carried the brands to their own followers, beyond the mall, and raised engagement on the brands' social channels.

A single store can propose the same to its mall, such as a designed personalisation studio in the atrium. It must look finished, manage visitor flow and serve the mall's interests as well as yours. Within your unit's lease line, the boundary of the space you rent, a window set built for photography stops passers-by and gets your product shared. In Dubai, prize promotions, draws and discounts need DET approval, and anything outside the unit needs the mall's approval.

At the till, and after the festival

Offer the benefit first, then capture the contact

At the till, shoppers want to pay and leave. Spelling out an email address in a queue is slow. Many UAE shoppers give a mobile number for SHARE or Blue Rewards because the benefit is clear, and far fewer give it when nothing is offered. In a 2026 Mailchimp study in the US, Canada, the UK and Australia, 65% of brands asked for a phone number but only 28% of consumers were willing to give one. In the UAE, 60% of shoppers worry their details will be sold (Comarch, February 2025).

Staff mention only the reward: scan this code for free engraving on this bottle, or for a free gift if you buy a second item today. The QR code opens a digital scratch card on the phone, and the reward can be used in the store straight away, which often brings a second purchase in the same visit. The customer joins by WhatsApp with one tap, and a CRM or loyalty app connected to your till links the scan to the receipt. Check with your till provider what it supports.

Ask nothing else at the till. Invite customers to complete a short profile at home in their own time, a few tick boxes for interests, and add to it with each visit.

Kohl's ran a paper version of this at Black Friday 2024 and reported a nearly 60% opt-in rate. The case is on page 11.

Use a WhatsApp Business account with approved message templates, and collect and use customer data within Federal Decree-Law 45 of 2021 on personal data protection.

Segment before you send

Use the data with care. Send fewer, more relevant messages, and control how often each group hears from you. Customers expect to be treated as individuals, and grouping them by need lets a single store send each of hundreds of customers an offer that fits.

High-value customers	A private preview of a new collection, or a place on a pre-sale list for limited stock
Gift purchasers	Gift ideas at a similar price before the next gifting season
Own-use purchasers	Care content, then a refill or upgrade when it is due
Service takers	A free personalisation on their next purchase

A private pre-sale list is an effective way to build loyalty and repeat business, and a single store can run its own for new stock.

Follow up with customers who have not returned

Set an automatic message for customers who have not been back within a set time, such as eight weeks after the festival, with an offer that fits their group. Landmark Group's fashion business Styli did this with buyers who had not purchased for six months. It sent WhatsApp messages in Arabic or English across the GCC and India from October to December 2024, and they converted 67% better than push notifications (WhatsApp Business case study, self-reported).

Actions before the festival opens

01

Review last year, then write the offer

Most competitors announce festival offers only on the day. Look at what stores in your category offered across Dubai's main malls last year, and what worked for you. Choose a service or experience that becomes your USP, then write it in one line with dates and location.

For example, "Free engraving in Arabic or English on any fragrance over AED 300, 4 December to 17 January, ground floor by the fountain entrance."

02

Build the channel list by 10 November

DET Connect, the mall's marketing team and its customer notifications, three to five editors, six to ten creators, your website festival page, your Google profile and the loyalty schemes your mall runs. A contact and a deadline for each.

Show the original and sale prices on any discount, as Dubai Consumer Protection requires.

03

Brief press and creators by 25 November

One ready-to-use item for editors. A preview for creators in the week before 4 December, with permits checked and a code for each, so you can attribute sales to each creator.

04

Plan staffing and store layout

Increase staffing and service capacity from 5pm to midnight, put the lead product and service point in sight of the walkway, and add mobile payment points.

Give existing customers first access to private appointments.

Actions during and after the festival

05

Put the offer first at the till

A QR code on the counter, gift bag and receipt opens an instant digital reward that can be used in store the same day. One tap to join by WhatsApp, linked to the receipt. Every other detail is optional and completed later.

06

Build partnerships that benefit both sides

Choose partners whose customers need what you sell: an evening-wear store with a fragrance store or a hair salon, a jeweller with a florist. Each partner promotes the other, with displays and rewards in both directions.

Propose a bonus-miles weekend to the mall with two or three neighbouring tenants.

07

Review results every three days

Check redemptions, source codes and contact capture by channel. By the end of the first week, after two reviews, move budget and staff to what is working, stop what is not, and re-merchandise the store overnight if the layout is slowing sales.

08

Segment, then follow up

Group customers by value, category and purchase mission, and add to each profile with every visit. Send each segment an offer that fits it, at a frequency it will accept. Report the three numbers monthly beside the sales figures.

A worked example

A made-up independent fragrance and gift shop with one unit in a large Dubai mall, selling about AED 4.2 million a year. The figures are invented to show the method. Gross margin is 55% at full price.

Year one, a discount

30% off most lines and AED 40,000 of social media ads across Dubai. About AED 250,000 was given away in discount. Phone numbers were taken only for deliveries, and no customer had agreed to marketing, so nobody could say who came back.

Year two, a service

Free engraving on any bottle over AED 300, a personalised ribbon for AED 20, and no discounts. The offer was featured in the mall's customer notifications, three press round-ups and posts by eight creators. The same AED 40,000 went on ads near the mall. An engraver worked every day from 2pm to midnight, and a café nearby displayed the store's offer in return for coffee vouchers for waiting customers. A QR code at the till opened a digital scratch card with a same-day reward.

The assumptions

Transactions rise 12% from the extra exposure. 31% of buyers join the list, about half the rate Kohl's reported for its game. 22% of those come back within 90 days, helped by segmented follow-up.

Results for the 45 days

	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO
Transactions	2,600	2,900
Average sale	AED 340	AED 390
Festival sales	AED 884,000	AED 1,131,000
Gross profit	AED 374,000	AED 622,000
Ads, engraver, coffees, window, permit	AED 40,000	AED 159,700
Profit after festival costs	AED 334,000	AED 462,300
Customers who agreed to hear from you	0	900
Bought again within 90 days	not known	200
Sales from those return visits	not known	AED 78,000

What the numbers show

Selling at full price with a service the competition did not offer raised profit after festival costs by AED 128,300, or 38%. The extra cost of the engraver, coffees, window and permit was AED 119,700, and it paid back within the festival.

The store also ended the festival with 900 customers it can contact, segmented by what they bought. 200 of them came back within 90 days and spent AED 78,000, sales that year one could not trace at all.

What has worked in other peak seasons

Four examples from the last two years, with what each one means for a single store. Some are reported by the company that ran the work, as stated.

A service that customers chose

The Perfume Shop, UK, 30 November to 24 December 2025, offered engraving, personalised ribbons and gift wrap in store. It engraved 21,000 bottles, ribbons rose 106.8% and gift wrap 84.6%, while bottles sold rose 6% (KamCity, January 2026). Demand for the service grew far faster than unit sales. A store can give the service free to win the sale, or charge a small fee and earn a margin on the add-on. Either way, it gives the customer a reason to buy at full price.

An instant reward for joining

Kohl's, US, Black Friday 2024, gave the first 200 to 300 customers at each store a game piece at the door with an instant prize, mostly store credit to spend that day. More than 250,000 prizes were won. Realtime Media, the promotions company that ran the game, reports a nearly 60% opt-in rate to Kohl's marketing list. The same-day credit drove extra spending in the same visit. A digital scratch card on the phone does the same without printing.

A mall promotion built on tenant offers

London Designer Outlet in the UK ran a VIP Week from 24 May to 1 June 2025. 44 retailers gave exclusive offers, sent to the centre's loyalty members by email and by push messages to phones near the centre. Against the 2024 event, transactions rose 88.7%, sales 53% and new loyalty members 170.9% (Coniq, the loyalty software company involved). A store with a distinctive offer can ask its own mall for a place in promotions like this.

Segmented follow-up in the UAE

Organic Foods and Café, a supermarket and café chain in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, identified high-value customers who were buying less often, using purchase frequency and order value. A three-week campaign of app messages with tailored offers, tested against each other, converted 13% of them, and its retention campaigns raised revenue 33% year on year (Insider, the software company involved, with no campaign dates given). The same segmentation works for a single store with a list of festival customers.

Mistakes to avoid and sources

Mistakes I see most often

- ☐ Competing on discount alone. Kantar's 2026 review found about two-thirds of price promotions are unprofitable. A value-added service is harder to copy.

- ☐ Asking for contact details at the till with nothing offered in return and no quick way to give them.

- ☐ Running a launch at the busiest hour, against every other launch in the mall.

- ☐ Running the store as normal, with the same staffing, layout and payment points for many more shoppers.

- ☐ Sending one message to everyone, without segmentation.

- ☐ Following up with another discount, which teaches customers to wait for the next sale.

- ☐ Keeping the same plan for all 45 days without checking what works.

Sources

Ometria, Black Friday 2025 data. Think with Google, research with Ipsos, August 2025. Mastercard Consumer Shopper Snapshot 2025. YouGov UAE, September 2025 and October 2026. Merkle Loyalty Barometer 2026. Adyen UAE Retail Report 2025, via Gulf Business. Nielsen, The Mall Mindset 2025, for Al Ghurair Centre. Dubai Media Office and The National, visitor figures, 2026. TradeArabia, festival dates, October 2026. Dubai Media Office, 2026 Retail Calendar. Gulf Today, DSF Sale Season, December 2025. What's On and Khaleej Times, DSF sale coverage, December 2025. Emirates 24/7, price display rules, August 2026. Gulf News, Media Council advertiser permit, February 2026, and Pinsent Masons, January 2026. Google and Public First, via Gulf News, June 2025. Emirates, Skywards at Dubai Mall. SHARE, using SHARE. Zawya, Blue Rewards at Dubai Festival City Mall, October 2025. Big Eye Agency, Meta geographic targeting, 2026. Eightx, reporting B&S Co, May 2026. Mailchimp with Ascend2, February 2026. Comarch, February 2025. WhatsApp Business, Styli case. KamCity, January 2026. Kohl's, November 2024, and Realtime Media. Coniq, London Designer Outlet case study. Insider, Organic Foods and Café case study, 2026. Kantar, Kicking the promotion habit, October 2026, via PPC Land.

Related reading

On ataylorcmo.com, the Dubai Mall and Emirates Skywards case study. The related guides are Get your business mentioned by AI tools, and Plan an event or activation that pays back, at ataylorcmo.com/guides.

Conclusion

The stores that did well in the festivals I ran had two things settled before December. They had a proposition their competitors could not match, and they had a way to identify and segment their festival customers so they could bring them back.

Start with the first this week. Audit what your competitors will offer across Dubai, write your one-line offer, and work out what it costs per sale. The channel plan, the till process and the segmentation all follow from it.

Next step

I offer a 30 minute discovery call at no charge, to look at your festival plan and how many of those customers you can expect to see again.

Book at ataylorcmo.com, or write to adam@ataylorcmo.com.



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MSc, FCIM, CDMP. A marketing leader with more than 20 years of international experience driving growth, market expansion and competitive positioning across luxury retail, real estate, free zones, automotive and mega-events.

I work as a fractional chief marketing officer for owners, executives and boards in the UAE, the UK and internationally. My career includes Group Director of Marketing and Events at Emaar, Director of Events and Entertainment at Expo 2020 Dubai, and marketing leadership of a UAE free zone, with more than 5,000 events and activations delivered for premium brands.

Credentials

MSc Marketing. Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Certified Digital Marketing Professional.

Experience

More than 20 years across the UAE, the wider Middle East, the UK and global markets.

Specialisms

Marketing strategy, brand positioning, UAE market entry, growth and marketing return on investment, events and experiential, and board governance.

Brands and organisations

Emaar · Expo 2020 Dubai · The Dubai Mall · IFZA · Al Tayer Motors · Ferrari · Gucci · Harvey Nichols · Bloomingdale's · Dolce and Gabbana

Contact

If you have a question about this guide, or want a second opinion on how quickly your customers are leaving, write or call. I reply within one working day.



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