

THE HOLIDAY WHOLESALER Q&A HANDBOOK

*{ concise answers to the 15 trickiest questions
about growing wholesale for the holidays }*

WHOLESALER
IN A BOX

About this Holiday Wholesale Q&A Handbook

The holidays are an intense time for makers. There is a lot of pressure to make sales while the making is good. But the outreach for those sales is best done during the summer, when many makers are juggling vacations, kids, and constant craft markets. Plus, many makers fear getting more orders than they can handle. While every maker is different, it can be helpful to get answers to burning questions that feel like obstacles. So this Q&A Handbook will share concise answers to the 15 common questions makers ask about wholesale around the holidays. As always, though, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. So be sure to “sense check” these answers against what you know to be right for you and your business.

About Wholesale In a Box

Wholesale In a Box was started by Etan and Emily, a husband-and-wife team. We're traveling homebodies with a love for station wagons, the Catskills, cooking, and brainstorming on our porch. Between the two of us, we have worked in high-powered management consulting, managed ops at startups, and helped artisans of every size create a business they love. But in 2015, we kept noticing makers who struggled to grow wholesale, sometimes closing their businesses when they failed. So we started tinkering with solutions -- at the time, nothing like Wholesale In a Box existed. Once we struck on the method, we started super-small, working with just 4 makers from our kitchen table. As we watched them thrive, we knew it was time to develop the software and training materials, and take the company full-time and nationwide. Today, Wholesale In a Box has worked with more than 500 makers, artists and designers around the world.

About Emily Kerr-Finell

Emily runs the show at Wholesale In a Box -- she develops our training materials, software, store portfolio, partnerships, and strategy. But what she loves most are the one-on-one coaching calls she does with each of our makers. Previously, she was Founder & CEO of Liga Masiva, a "global farmers' market" of farmers in Latin America. She has also worked at FMCG, a boutique management consulting firm and was a Business Advisor at the SBA's Small Business Development Center. Her work has been featured in O: The Oprah Magazine, Forbes, and Entrepreneur Magazine. She has spoken on making and business at The Hudson River Exchange, Starting Bloc, and The Maker's Summit. When not working with makers, Emily tries to make it to yoga, explores the Hudson Valley, and makes progress on the shawl she's been knitting for 3 years.

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Holiday Wholesale Questions and Answers

{for makers who want to make the most of this holiday season}

Q. I'm brand-new to wholesale and this is my first holiday season. What should I do to get ready?

- A. If you're newer to wholesale, you want to focus on building your wholesale foundation for the long term. And the good news is -- the things that you'd want to do to build wholesale long-term are the same things you'd want to do to cultivate holiday sales now, for the most part. That means great outreach materials, a system for connecting with stores, great photos, and products that you can really stand behind. Usually, new makers focus too much on making new things; they start outreach way too late; and they don't give their outreach materials enough careful consideration. So be on the lookout for those tendencies and try to lean the opposite way, if you can.

One other caveat here. If you're brand new, don't worry too much about being overwhelmed by a million sales. For the most part, it takes time to get traction and your main challenge (to be blunt) will be getting sales in the door at all. Focus on connecting with stores as much, and as effectively, as you can, rather than trying to get just the perfect amount of sales made.

Q. I'm getting serious about wholesale this year. What do you recommend for giving myself the best possible chance of success?

- A. First, start early. It's not really possible to do outreach too early because generally, a store owner will ask you to circle back if the timing is wrong but they love the line. It is possible to do outreach too late, though -- so make the summer your holiday outreach season. Second, focus on relationships. Yes, you want to make sales now. And that's a good thing. But don't forget that you're in this for the long haul. And it matters more that you grow dramatically over 2-3 years, than it does that you grow by a chunk in the next 2-3 months. Next: make your outreach materials as good as they can be. They don't need to be perfect, but small changes, that aren't that time-consuming to make, can have a big impact on how your line is perceived. Finally: create a system to connect with stores. If you're a Wholesale In a Box maker, you already have a great system for doing outreach to stores set up for yourself. Think about whether you need to really etch out some solid time each week to send the emails and do followups, though -- and commit to keeping that schedule every week, especially for the next few months.

Q. What is the exact right time to do wholesale outreach for the holidays?

- A. Stores tend to plan their buying several months in advance, so generally, they're buying for Christmas in August. But the exact way stores break down those seasons varies store to store and year to year. Some stores buy for the holidays well into November, especially in terms of filling gaps on the shelves. Others completely close out their holiday buying by early September.

Makers often ask me about the ideal time to reach out to stores for the holidays, and my answer is: earlier than you think. Different stores wrap up their ordering at different times. But no matter the store, you really can't lose by being a little too early. July and August is a great time to start but most people delay their holiday wholesale outreach until it's close to too late. My observation is that it's actually fear that causes us to delay marketing and sales until the last possible minute. Because at the last possible minute, the fear that you've completely missed the boat starts to outweigh the fear of sharing your work. But if you can manage your own discomfort, your "return on investment" of marketing and sales work you do *early* will be SO much more than marketing and sales work you do at the last minute. So start early, plan what you intend to do to grow over the holidays, and take it one step at a time.

I also really encourage you to not obsess too much about the exact right timing. Even if a store isn't able to place an immediate order (but is interested), outreach always starts the conversation and builds the relationship for when they are ready to buy. Overall, the main thing is consistently reaching out to shops that are a good fit, over the long term.

Q. Is it worth doing any kind of outreach in November and December?

- A. I think so -- but it's a different kind of outreach. In November and December, store owners are focused on selling product to their customers, more than they are focused on selecting new products to purchase for the store. A shop owner may be buying (it varies store to store) -- but not at the same rate as she might be in September or February. So, many makers will put their wholesale outreach and relationship-building on pause for a few months. Ultimately, we defer to each individual business owner about what is right for your business. You may want to take a break, and that's fine (and you can just put your Wholesale In a Box subscription on the "Cultivate" option to save some money and not get behind.)

But here's what we know for sure: stores will be buying among their highest quantities as early as January -- and the best time to build the relationships that underlie those new purchases is now. That said, you do need to approach outreach in November and December quite differently than you might approach it other times of the year. Some things to consider in your wholesale efforts this winter:

1. Shift your wording and what you request.

While normally you're politely suggesting an immediate order, you can certainly shift your wording to request that they take a look at your products and let you know if they might be a good fit for the store at some point in the next few months. Acknowledge that you're reaching out during a very busy time of year -- even consider saying that you wanted to start a conversation, but that they can feel free to not respond until things have settled down.

2. Adjust your own goals.

Right now, your goals may be more about achieving a certain number of connections with stores, and less about orders placed. Once you hit January and February, you can return to an "orders placed" mindset -- but you'll benefit from all the relationship building you did now.

3. Focus on building relationships now, and follow up for an order later.

One thing you can do is shift your followup schedule so that you're sending one email now -- and then following up in January. That way, you'll be circling back when the store's schedule has settled down, *and* you won't be perceived as pestering a busy person during their busiest time. As a Wholesale In a Box customer, you can ask us to adjust your followups to be in January rather than in November and December, to make more time for productio, and also have a more relationship-oriented approach with retailers.

4. Be thoughtful about timing.

I wouldn't recommend reaching out to retailers in the 2 weeks immediately before Christmas and several days after -- so nudge your outreach to just before that period or just after. Since that is the most chaotic time of year for store owners, it can seem a little "tone deaf" to get an email from a vendor right then.

Q. What do I do if I want to grow but I'm not sure I can handle all the production myself?

- A. Ideally, you don't wait until you're already completely overwhelmed before you get help. The time to start setting it up is long before you'll need it. Perhaps you're so well-established that you can actually interview for skilled hourly workers to help you with

production, and you already know how many hours per week, during which weeks, you will need them. If so -- GREAT -- make it happen. But, if your business is a little more unpredictable at this point, and you're not sure whether you'll need help, whether you'll be able to pay for it, or how much help you'll need -- that is ok. You can ask a couple of friends to commit to being "on call" during a 3-week period for movie-and-production nights. You can tell a friend's teenage daughter you'll pay her \$8 an hour for production help but that it might be 2 hours or 22 hours. In other words, you can start cultivating the help you'll need, but doing so in a way that is flexible and fits the stage that your business is at. It's ok to tell people, "I might need help, but I'm not sure how much."

Q. What would you recommend as the easiest format for retailers to place an order?

A. Refining your ordering process -- so that it's as simple as possible -- is a great thing to do before the holiday ordering season is in full swing.

There are a few alternatives. You can have a whole separate store that is solely for wholesale (and password protected, for instance.) But that can be time-consuming to set up and manage. It's probably where you'll end up eventually, but not necessary in the immediate future! If you're not 90% of the way there, I wouldn't recommend hustling to create this right before the holidays.

If you have a great line sheet, sometimes the most simple and ultimately straightforward thing is to just tell retailers to email you with their order! I know it sounds almost too simple but until it gets unwieldy and too time-consuming for you, it can be quite simple for the store owner and actually not that complicated for you. So in your ordering section, you just say to email you or call with their order and that you'll send them back an invoice. Remember to set expectations on your terms page about when payment is required -- at ordering, before shipping, or some combination of both.

A final option that some folks use is to just create a 50% coupon code that the store owner can use to shop in your regular store. This works well for many retailers, as it's super-simple, but only works if your wholesale margin is 50% on all lines and if your regular retail website is a very strong representation of your brand. (There are also sometimes minimums or shipping obstacles here, but they can often be figured out.)

Q. I have some special holiday items in my line. Should I add a holiday themed page to my linesheet or send retailers two documents (my linesheet AND a 1-page, holiday-themed, mini linesheet)?

A. Either approach could work well. Generally, I lean towards having one single attachment in each email -- and probably that's best here too. Busy store owners will often only open one document, so you want to make sure that all of the information you want to share is in one place. That said, if you think your holiday line is SUPER strong and you really want that to be the main thing folks are ordering this season, you could separate it to make it even more obvious and compelling. For most makers, though, you'll want them in the same line sheet.

Q. I'm considering offering an incentive to retailers to place their holiday orders before a certain date. Is this a good or bad idea, what would good incentives be, and what would be optimal timing?

A. While not a necessity, the idea of offering retailers an incentive like this can be a great thing to do, if you have the margins to support it easily. Plus, with holiday sales increasing the stakes, an early-order incentive can help avoid a situation where a retailer loves your line, but waits to order and then ends up ordering something else because it comes along and catches their eye.

In terms of what to offer, and how to structure it, I'd keep it fairly simple. Free shipping could be fantastic, as could a simple percentage discount. Since so many retailers do their holiday buying on the early side, you might want to make the deadline somewhere between mid-August and early September (but certainly not any later than that.)

Q. Should I create holiday-specific items?

A. It depends on the maker. Most makers probably shouldn't create holiday-specific items because of all the time it takes to do the product development, photography, line sheet creation, etc. Instead, they should focus on doing holiday-related framing, promotion, and outreach for the line they already have. Some lines, of course, are really holiday driven -- like paper lines. If that's the case, then you'll of course need items for all of the major holidays. But if you're a newer maker, and your line is something that's not, by necessity, holiday-related (for instance, a jewelry line), I'd stay away from creating new pieces. See it as an "extra" that you can add when it feels doable, not a core component of your wholesale strategy.

Q. What's the best time/approach to start pitching Valentine's Day products?

- A. This is a really good question. Valentine's Day is tricky because you really need to be promoting Valentine's to stores when they're in the thick of their own holiday sales, in-store (November and December.) It can be hard to nail the timing, especially when you're newer to wholesale. You can certainly do your outreach for that in late November and early December (just stay away from the time immediately around Christmas. Alternatively, you could consider having it be part of your line sheet when you're doing pre-holiday outreach so that store owners see it during summer and early fall months. All of that said, my general advice is to 1) start earlier than you think and 2) not worry too much about pinpointing the timing. In other words, focus on building relationships with stores that are a great fit, rather than hitting the timing around the holidays or trade shows exactly right. If they love the line, they'll let you know and you can circle back accordingly.

Q. Should I do a mass email to all my stockists to check in and give them updates on the line?

- A. A mass email to your stockists is certainly better than not contacting them at all -- so if those are your alternatives, yes, send that mass email. That said, your relationships with your current stockists are some of the most valuable business relationships you have. So treat them as such. Consider setting aside a morning or even a full day just to do pre-holiday personal emails to all of the stores you currently sell to -- sometime in late summer. Make these emails personal, concise, and warm. Reference something that you know the store is doing or working on (perhaps something they've mentioned on Instagram). And catch them up on any products that they might be particularly excited about for the store this season. Be sure to re-attach (or link to) your line sheet or catalog and make your ordering process clear.

Q. Is now the right time to launch a new product?

- A. Launch 'em if you've got 'em. If you have a product that's brewing, pre-holiday season is a great time to do it. Don't let it be a distraction for the sales and marketing of your current set of products. But if there is something that you think you could get out in time, the holidays are a great time to get new things out into the world. Most makers don't have a product that's ready to go in this way, however -- and so adding a new product or products can be a huge distraction and lead to a chain of events that causes inadequate, too-late

outreach, and super-low holiday wholesale sales. So err on the side of sticking with the line you already have unless you have something great that's pretty much ready to go.

Q. How much should I focus on current stockists vs. new stores?

- A. If you're growing wholesale, it's tempting to focus entirely on getting new orders from stores. But one of the most important things you can do is cultivate your relationships with your current stockists. In other words: love the one(s) you're with. How to cultivate reorders during the holidays? So many store owners tell me that they don't have a super-precise system for deciding what to reorder. So a big part of your focus should be making your line visible to the stockist and being of service to the stockist. That way you're top-of-mind when the store owner is making their list of items to buy. The way I'd recommend doing this is "rounding up" a list of your current stockists. In the Wholesale In a Box system, you can do this easily just by filtering for All Stockists. I'd recommend reviewing one by one, reflecting on who might benefit from a check-in and what they'd be interested in hearing about (whether an update or a new product). Then, schedule a task for each store that you think would be good to check in with. Again, that's easy to do in Wholesale In a Box by clicking Add a Task. The idea here is: 1) reflect on who will benefit from a check-in and 2) plan out and schedule all the check-in tasks at once rather than getting distracted and doing them one-by-one and 3) contact shops individually with thoughtful communication about your line.

Q. Should I make any changes to my outreach materials right now? I was thinking about creating a whole new line sheet.

- A. The pre-holiday period is a great time of year to spruce up your outreach materials. It doesn't have to be a hugely time consuming process, but if you can set aside even an hour to pull up all of your outreach materials and look at them with fresh eyes, that can be helpful. Take a look at your line sheet, product photography, email template, and other materials. Make a list of the things that will take the least investment of time and money, and that will have the biggest impact on the quality of your materials. Get a fresh pair of eyes on them if you can, too. (We provide Wholesale In a Box folks detailed feedback on their materials, but even a non-expert can often catch inconsistencies or mistakes that you might not have caught yourself.) I will give the caveat that the summer is not a great time to completely restart and redo things. So, maybe you swap out some photos, but don't take brand new photos of every piece in the line. Maybe you add one new product but don't launch a completely new line. Maybe you make improvements to your line sheet but don't start completely from scratch.

Q. I'm pretty seasoned with wholesale but would like to really rev up my wholesale game this year. Any suggestions for me?

- A. If you have several holiday seasons under your belt already -- then process and act on that experience. The majority of makers we work with have an incredible depth of experience and business savvy but they mentally discount it and say that they're "making it up as they go along" or "flying by the seat of their pants." Honestly? That is true for very few of the people that are reading this Handbook. Claim the knowledge you have by spending 20 minutes jotting down answers to these questions:

What went well for me last holiday season?

What did I wish went better last holiday season?

If I were looking at my business from the outside, what would I recommend doing?

What are a few things I can do differently this year to build on what worked, do less of what didn't, and get better results?

This will let you act in very concrete ways on what you've already learned -- and improve substantially from whatever your results were last year.

In Summary...

The holiday season can be a great time for makers to shift their business into a new gear -- which you'll then reap the benefits from for months and years to come.

Keep these “do’s” and “don’ts” in mind as you grow wholesale over the holidays:

DO start outreach earlier than you think.

DON'T worry too much about nailing the exact right timing for outreach.

DO use the summer to refine your outreach materials, add individual items to your line, and get into the groove with outreach.

DON'T use the summer to start things from scratch.

DO use your own experience to reflect on and improve the results you got last year.

DON'T focus solely on making sales to new stores. Cultivating relationships and reorders with current stockists is equally or more important.

DO reach out to current stockists individually, personally, and in a way that's relevant to them if you can possibly find the time.

DON'T completely drop all store interactions and outreach in November and December -- just approach it differently.

DO reach out if you have other questions that weren't covered here. We're at team@wholesaleinabox.com and we'll get back to you within 1 business day.

Thank you!

Thank you much for the work you do everyday as a maker -- and for being with us at Wholesale In a Box. It's an honor to work with makers like you every day.