



PLANNING FOR CHRISTMAS 2.0

The fine food industry is primed to capture the spirit, optimism and joy of Christmas ahead of this year's campaigns, says Natasha Spencer-Jolliffe

For many of us, heartwarming television adverts mark the official arrival of Christmas. It has been this way, born from the industry's stellar lesson in marketing 101, ever since John Lewis emerged in 2007 with its Shadow campaign. Luxury, premium and fine food and drinks brands spotted a powerful formula to capture consumers' hearts and loyalty at what is traditionally the most lucrative time of the year. One that combines strong storytelling, engaging characters, and effortless campaigns.

From mid-pandemic to post-lockdown

The wholesome and tear-jerking social narrative we have become so familiar with and embracing of in recent years took on a very tangible meaning in 2020, as consumers felt the moving sentiment behind its popular Christmas campaigns even more. Yet, for fine food and drink brands and retailers behind the scenes, it was a completely different tale.

'Christmas in July' – the marketing phenomenon that sweeps through food and drink every year to leverage new and evolving trends, shifts in behaviours and changes in purchasing habits – paused in

2020. Instead, retailers battled to keep afloat, oversee supply chains and accompanying disruption, and manage orders as best they could.

In 2021, while the pandemic has not disappeared, as retailers are fighting hard to navigate disruptions, delays and demands – 2021 is full of the promise that this year's Christmas will be a reflection of the spirit, hope and positivity of the festive season itself.

Planning for Christmas: creating something special

Unique and novel fine food and drink products and ingredients that are of the highest quality are always the top priority at Christmas. When it comes to planning fine food and drink campaigns, it is all about trying to find the best and most excellent product on the market. "Quality has to be second to none," confirms Drogo Montagu, founder of Fine Food Specialist. It is not just the content of products that need to be carefully considered at Christmas either, but the product's outer casing and branding too. "Packaging is definitely part of what we look for as the product has to look good if you are a customer buying from a website," adds Montagu.

With competition rising in the fine food and drink sector, brands are constantly having to innovate. For Fine Food Specialist, in 2021, the brand branched out and started to make its own products, which

include plates of salami and seafood, as well as small tasting sets with products such as Iberico pork, yakiniku cuts and baby squid. "It becomes exclusive to us because it cannot be copied," says Montagu.

Returning customers is not the only recurring aspect of strong Christmas campaigns; much-loved products also stand the test of time. "If you like glazed ham and potted Stilton on your table at Christmas, you are likely to buy that year after year," shares Montagu.

Staying on top of the big trends ahead of Christmas is vital too, though, Montagu emphasises: "We will have all the staples and then we always go and look for cutting-edge and amazing new products."

What's set to be big in 2021's Christmas campaigns?

So what new products are likely to be on the menu in 2021 to reflect growing consumer demand? Food as a luxurious present is set to transform Christmas campaigns this year. "We have seen a big increase in gifting this year so intend on really pushing that side of the business," reveals Montagu.

Looking ahead to this Christmas, brands know that it is as much about what they do not source and bring onto their product list as what they do choose. Fine Food Specialist will take on panettones and Amaretti, for example. "But you have got to be careful about taking on too much just to look Christmassy," says Montagu. The brand plans to take on up to 30 products this Christmas, many of which will be small items such as nougat or almonds that can easily be added to baskets.

Amid the pandemic, Valia

Christidou, founder of The Food Launchpad envisages that 2021 Christmas campaigns will be different to 2020. "I expect a lot of the campaigns will focus on the fact that this Christmas families and friends will finally be allowed to meet – get-togethers will be larger than last year or even previous years, as we have all realised how precious these opportunities and occasions are and that they cannot be taken for granted." Also, consumers may well be looking to treat themselves with fine food and drink that is both memorable and extraordinary.

"With many families having missed out on their traditional Christmas gatherings, we expect that people will be planning a big Christmas this year," enthuses Matt Whelan, managing director of Fieldfare. "Little luxuries, special treats and impressive centrepieces will all play an important part on the menu," he adds.

There is also another key trend we can expect to see in this year's Christmas campaigns, Whelan explains. "Nostalgia will play a big role this year with some classics returning to the table such as 'Granny's famous trifle' as families and friends come back together and make up for the lost time last year."

Planning food and drink Christmas campaigns

For fine food and drink retailers wanting to get ahead of the Christmas period now, there is one key tip Montagu shares based on years of experience in the sector: "Planning, planning, planning."

Fine Food Specialist's 2021 planning is set to be an easier task than last year as the brand has more key people involved and



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therefore, more overall resources and bandwidth. “Christmas in this sector is always difficult, but as long as you have all your campaigns ready, a happy team and know your limits you will get through it,” Montagu adds. As for guidance on what to avoid, the fine food brand founder notes, “Taking on too many orders and not being able to fulfill them is the worst mistake you can ever make.”

With online so huge, email and social media marketing make up increasing advertising spend and areas of campaign planning. Fine Food Specialist focused heavily on email marketing last year. Ahead of this year’s campaign planning, the brand will look at 2020’s figures, statistics and every email sent to analyse its content, engagement and sales. “It is massive planning,” says Montagu. When it comes to planning food and drink Christmas campaigns, firstly, fine food and drink brands must consider their overall offering. Brands will explore their product range including packaging formats and the retail sales pack to explore the type of advertising and promotional campaigns they will adopt.

Typical campaign timescales

The founder of strategic consultancy, The Food Launchpad, talks through a typical schedule for brands. “Campaigns that will be running are ready by February/March each year,” says Christidou. “Production starts in the summer and often for the big lines well before that, as the first few products find their way onto

the large supermarket shelves in September,” Christidou notes.

“So effectively everything has been sold in and production is starting by now for Christmas 2021,” notes Christidou. For some brands, preparation is going far beyond 2021, demonstrating the need to plan ahead. “The innovation teams are now starting to think about Christmas 2022,” says Christidou.

From the big retailers that focus on the conceptualisation and creation of Christmas TV ads, campaign themes are finalised as concepts in January and February, so that the sales teams can give an overall picture of the support that will go behind the Christmas ranges to the retailers when they present these concepts in February and March. The final details and the execution of the filming of the ads happens much later. Creating product range lists and carrying out promotions happens earlier in the year, Christidou notes, before “the biggest push takes place in November and December”.

Highlighting the specific considerations and uniqueness of organising Christmas campaigns, Christidou says, “By the time you can evaluate the effectiveness of a campaign and that of your competition, you need to be putting the final touches to that of the next year.” For many brands, it will often be December or January before they receive all of the data demonstrating what was successful and what failed to deliver, but Christidou says, “By then you are already well down the line with the campaign for the following year.”

Meeting consumer demands

“Most people like to be prepared at Christmas to prevent a last-minute panic, but they also like to have flexibility so they can plan for the unexpected,” says Whelan. Ahead of this year’s Christmas period, frozen foods provider Fieldfare undertook an extensive rebranding project in January 2021. The move reflects the brand’s new strategy to challenge the way consumers shop, encouraging more sustainable habits whilst delivering a high-quality frozen produce range.

Commenting on its proposition, Whelan details, “[It] encourages people to take what they want but not more than they need, gives people flexibility and choice so you can plan ahead and cater for last-minute changes, without having to worry about lots of waste.” Fieldfare also offers individually portioned products catering for specific diets, such as its Goats Cheese Tart, which will be new for Christmas.

“Consumers are looking for new ways in which to shop more sustainably and are discovering the various benefits of frozen foods, which is evident in the 19.7% rise in sales of frozen foods the UK has seen” Whelan emphasises. As sales have risen in 2021 and consumer needs continue to evolve, fine brands like Fieldfare are looking for ways to support farm shops, garden centres, delis, butchers and retailers in the run up to Christmas.

Here’s to a festive season full of nostalgic products and luxuriously fine gifts adorning the offline and, increasingly, online shelves.



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