



# How to have a successful holiday season in spite of COVID-19

A month-by-month guide to get ready to ring in the season in retail



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# Introduction

It may feel like you just put away your holiday decor and finished closing out the books of the 2019 holiday season, but the 2020 holiday season is already upon us.

And it seems that each season is bigger than the last. The 2019 holiday season saw retail sales rise 4.1% from 2018 to \$730.2 billion, which is almost double the growth seen in 2018<sup>1</sup>.

While some express concern that the global pandemic caused by the spread of COVID-19 may delay or alter holiday shopping this year, others are hopeful that even if all aspects of life aren't back to normal, holiday shopping will still resume. It just might look a bit different.

Since the beginning of March, in-store shopping has shifted online. On the Bazaarvoice Network of more than 6,200 brand and retailer sites, each month of shelter-in-place has seen significant growth in page views and order count<sup>2</sup>.

While COVID-19 has shifted how consumers shop, there are some habits we expect to continue once state, city, and country regulations ease. Credit Suisse Group predicts COVID will result in "accelerating structural changes in consumer shopping, possibly by 5+ years, as they are introduced to new retailers and new shopping methods including online grocery and delivery, and further consolidate purchases at multi-category, multi-channel retailers."<sup>3</sup>

In last year's holiday consumer survey<sup>4</sup>, we found that about a fifth of shoppers planned to start their holiday shopping as early as mid-July around Amazon Prime Day. While this year's Prime Day was originally reported to be delayed until September and is now pushed to October<sup>5</sup>, shoppers will still be starting holiday shopping early – a sentiment that brands and retailers agree with. Almost a third (31%) of businesses are starting their promotions and sales earlier this year, and over a third (39%) of businesses think researching and purchasing will start even earlier this year due to COVID-19<sup>6</sup>.

This year's coronavirus pandemic is anticipated to have a lasting impact on shoppers<sup>7</sup> and their preferences, but knowing this now is strategic for your business as you plan for your busiest season of the year.

We surveyed over 140 brands and retailers in North America, Europe, and Australia to better understand how they're preparing for a holiday season unlike any other. Coupled with the Bazaarvoice Network data from last year's holiday season, we identified distinct trends in each month directly before, during, and after the holiday season.

# Here's how your business should be preparing for these consumer behaviors.

# Location of brands and retailers surveyed



# Holiday shopping activity by the numbers

When looking at shopping behavior from July through January, which we identified as peak months for holiday preparedness and shopper behavior, there were noticeable patterns of behavior in each month.



# Holiday page views and order counts

For ease of reference, we define typical shopping activity as that which happens in September. October is the start of the research phase for shoppers. November and December are the peak holiday season, and January is when we see our final shift in holiday-related shopping behavior.



# July

While many COVID-19 stay-at-home orders are expected to still be in effect come July and with reopenings happening in a staggered manner, holiday shopping may still look a little bit different. But, online shopping is something consumers will always have access to and be more accustomed to using - use this to your advantage. While 66% of businesses surveyed think we'll be shopping in-store by the holiday season, 85% of brands and retailers are still anticipating higher online sales this year than years past due to COVID-19<sup>6</sup>.

### **AMAZON PRIME DAY'S IMPACT ON BUYING**

Prior to the launch of Amazon Prime Day in 2015, July was often a Jull for shopping activity. Not quite the beginning of summer, when seasonal clothes are purchased alongside Mother's and Father's Day gifts, and not guite yet back-to-school shopping season, when parents purchase pencils and notebooks and college students decorate their dorm rooms.

What started as a single day event in July 2015 on Amazon's website to honor their 20th anniversary has become an internet-wide phenomenon<sup>8</sup>. Now spanning 48 hours, Prime Day offers special deals to Amazon Prime members. Not to be outdone, other retail sites have begun offering their own "Prime Day deals," which has earned this sale event the nickname of "Black Friday in July".

In 2019, 70% of shoppers who made a purchase on Prime Day said at least one item they bought was for a holiday gift<sup>9</sup>. Shoppers are getting savvier each year in how they can save money on holiday gifts, and this is one of the ways. Prime Day deals aren't just limited to Amazon, and this has been a win for many brands and retailers outside of the platform. According to our Network data (which represents) shopping activity outside of Amazon), July 15th and 16th of 2019 (Prime Day) saw a 23.6% increase in order count over the typical day. Page views were also up 13% over typical. Clearly, this retail holiday has a halo effect on brands and retailers outside of Amazon, as shoppers compare prices and options across sites.

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# THE CATEGORIES THAT HAD THE LARGEST SPIKES IN **ORDER COUNT ON PRIME DAY** AND OUR NETWORK WERE:













While some may question whether COVID-19 will negatively impact Prime Day, 90% of brands and retailers say they're ready to spend as much or more on Prime Day this year than in years past<sup>10</sup>. And with shoppers hungrier for deals and sales, they may be willing to spend as much or more too.

While this year's Prime Day has been delayed until October, a lot can be learned from looking at last year's big shopping event. It's important to have a plan in place for when Amazon announces the official date - and it's not just about sales.

### **GET YOUR USER-GENERATED CONTENT READY**

We also noticed that July (along with August and September) has one of the highest rates of user-generated content (UGC) interaction – which means shoppers are engaging with customer reviews, photos, and questions and answers.

Prime Day or not, you need to have UGC on your site ready to get ahead of shopper traffic. Take advantage of the Prime Day delay to build up the content on your product pages ahead of the major holiday shopping rush. According to the Bazaarvoice Sales and Client Success teams, the #1 thing brands and retailers mentioned to them as a pain point during the holiday season was not collecting enough UGC on their pages before the shopping surge began.

Almost half of brands and retailers (47%) believe UGC has become even more important for their business because of COVID-19. While 48% of those surveyed have used UGC in their holiday campaigns previously, another 21% are interested in trying it this year<sup>6</sup>.

Start with your best-selling products and any new products you're planning to launch ahead of the holidays. Identifying gaps in review coverage can help you fill them before the bulk of holiday gifts are purchased. For many shoppers, reviews (or lack thereof) can be the make or break moment in their decision making.

Make sure you have post-interaction emails (PIE) turned on, turn on a reachback PIE if you have customers who wouldn't have received a real-time PIE, and consider running a sampling campaign or two. We have found that sampling campaigns run through our platform have at least an 85% response rate. Even if you only sent out 100 items, that could net 85 responses or more as a result.



Sampling campaigns can be run for current top products, products lacking in reviews, new products, and anything in between. Sampling campaigns aren't just for one-to-one trial and awareness. They can be used for brand advocacy and sharing, and to drive reviews. It allows customers to easily try a new product at no cost to them and drives both review and social content that influences other shoppers. It can help you quickly collect reviews for new products, build brand loyalty, drive traffic to your website, and create buzz among the marketplace.

When you run a sampling campaign, you can ask those who received samples to write reviews on your site, post on social media, or both. The typical sampling campaign takes about 5-8 weeks from ideation to shipment, and it takes about another 1-5 weeks to fully collect content from those who received the samples.

# **Sampling for conversion**

More reviews means more purchases, insights, and SEO benefits



Committing to a sampling campaign in July can guarantee you'll have the content you need on your product pages by October at the latest, which is when shopper research ramps up. One of the most strategic types of sampling Bazaarvoice offers is a custom VoxBox campaign. We'll match your products with the right consumer, manage the logistics of shipping and fulfillment, collect reviews, generate social content and uncover consumer insights. These custom campaigns will help you generate awareness, social buzz, and reviews – which are crucial for customers while they're doing their holiday shopping.

Want to see what a campaign could look like for your brand? Get started here.

# What is the timeline for a Custom VoxBox?





### 2-3 months post-shipment

Final insights reports are delivered to client

# **August/September**

Often thought of as the back-to-school months, it's easy to ignore the importance these months have for the holiday shopping season. The end of summer and beginning of fall is the time that your business should be moving all of the pieces of the puzzle into place before customer shopping starts picking up in October. In fact, the largest number of businesses we surveyed said September is most often when they start their holiday planning (15%), followed by **October (14%) and June (13%)** $^{6}$ .





All my friends are buying this backpack.



During last year's holiday season, our Network data shows UGC interaction rate peaked in September, building up from July and August. After September, the rate begins to taper off as shoppers commit to holiday buying decisions.

If you launched sampling campaigns at the beginning of the summer, they should be coming to a close, leading to an influx of reviews and other forms of UGC to display and showcase on your product pages, social media, and within other marketing campaigns.

If you haven't, there's still time to solicit more UGC and feedback from customers before peak buying behavior. While we recommend launching sampling campaigns as early as you can, there's still time in the fall to kick off a sampling campaign to secure UGC before November. For example, Bazaarvoice's Trylt sampling option takes about eight weeks from start to finish and allows you to target products to your ideal consumers. Kicking off a campaign by the beginning of September would secure UGC by the time Cyber Week kicks off in November.

Remember to appropriately badge the content from sampling campaigns, so it's clear that consumers received these products for free in exchange for their feedback.



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# How to solicit UGC and feedback

SEND OUT AN AUTOMATED POST-INTERACTION EMAIL

In addition to collecting UGC, take this time to also respond to all reviews and answer all product questions. When shoppers begin to spend more time on your product pages in the next few months, you'll want to ensure they have access to the information they need. According to our network data, review and question submission has been significantly higher this year compared to last year - largely due to the online shopping push as a result of COVID-19.

We found there is a 159% lift in revenue per visitor and a 138% increase in conversion among shoppers engaging with reviews across best-in-class sites<sup>11</sup>. Part of what shoppers are looking for as they're buying are brand responses. In fact, 48% say brands and retailers responding to reviews improves their odds of buying the product<sup>12</sup>.

Think of this time period as the gift wrap for your marketing strategy. You've decided what your plans are (the gift itself), and now, you're making sure you have everything you need to execute (the gift wrap). This includes getting the content on your website in order and making it appealing to shoppers... a.k.a. putting a bow on top.





**RESPOND QUICKLY.** For reviews, a best practice response time is two to five days.



**REVIEWS** with one, two, and three stars.



**ALLOT ENOUGH TIME FOR RESPONSES.** Expect to spend one hour for every 50 reviews you encounter. This includes time for research, writing, and editing your responses.



**AVOID CANNED RESPONSES** — consumers see through these. They feel impersonal, unhelpful, and corporate. Instead, engage customers by mixing up language in a way that feels authentic.



my answer?"

# **Responding to reviews:**

# **PRIORITIZE RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE RATINGS AND**

**CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE(S).** Always ask: "Is my response providing value both to this customer and future customers reading

# October

Generally, shoppers conduct the majority of their holiday shopping research in-store or online on retailer sites<sup>13</sup>, with some shoppers even going online from their mobile phones while in-store. With hesitations around in-person shopping due to COVID-19, we anticipate that research behavior will shift online even more than in years past.

A Deloitte research study conducted during last year's holiday season found that the majority (65%) of shoppers head to the sites of the brands and retailers they're buying from to do their research, in lieu of using platforms like social media and third-party review sites. Even if shoppers do decide to buy in-store, 69% are still looking online first<sup>14</sup>.







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CLIENTS THINK THE FEATURE THAT WILL PLAY THE **BIGGEST** ROLE FOR CONSUMERS WHEN CHOOSING WHERE AND HOW TO SHOP WILL BE:



**Curbside and home** delivery options



and recommendations

21% **Optimized mobile** shopping experience With big sales days not too far away, our Network data shows October is when shoppers begin to ramp up their research and time on e-commerce sites. Compared to a typical month, page views were up 5.8% in October last year, as shoppers explored their product options.

While browsing for holiday gifts, shoppers also have more questions than usual about the products they're researching. As shoppers are deciding what item to buy, they'll often submit a question on an e-commerce site, when the option is available. Things like "Do these pants run true to size?" or "How powerful is this blender?" might be the final information they need before they commit to buying.

October is when we saw the first big spike in question submissions. October received 4.5% more questions than the typical month. Since the onset of COVID-19, we've seen a spike in questions across our network year-over-year. With this new adapted shopping behavior, we anticipate this year's spike to be even higher.

The more questions and answers you have on your product page, the better. We found that when shoppers engage with Q&A on product pages, there's a 111% lift in conversion rate and a 120% revenue per visitor lift on best-in-class sites<sup>11</sup>.

Additionally, we found that shoppers generally prefer to ask brands questions via social media<sup>11</sup>. If you don't have a holiday-specific plan to address consumer questions at-scale across a variety of channels, now is the time to outline one the influx of questions will only grow higher as the season wears on.



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Remember – you're not just replying for the current client but future

### NOTICE WHICH QUESTIONS SHOPPERS ASK REPEATEDLY

and consider updating an FAQ page or your product page to address

While holiday purchasing picks up exponentially in November and early December, there is an uptick in shopping in October too. Some shoppers just couldn't wait to buy order count on our network during this month increased 5.5% over typical.

While buying behavior does start to heat up before temperatures start cooling down, use this opportunity to ensure your sites are technically ready. Given the extra online sales that can be expected from COVID-19, make sure your site can handle the influx of traffic. Work with your developer team on code freeze deadlines, and decide on any final website changes - you want to make sure you're ready to put your best foot forward.

Additionally, make sure your social media channels are equipped as well. 61% of businesses anticipate higher engagement and purchasing through social media for the holiday season because of COVID-19<sup>6</sup>. Prepare shoppable social content for channels like Facebook and Instagram, consider partnering with influencers to promote your products on social, and optimize your website for mobile. Thinking ahead will make the buying experience even more seamless for your customers.





# **November/December**

Whether you believe the holiday season starts with Thanksgiving sales or as soon as the Halloween decor is put away on November 1st (or even sooner), one thing isn't up for debate: November is huge for holiday shopping. 44% of shoppers say they begin their gift buying in the first half of the month, and 64% say the same of the second half of the month<sup>14</sup>.

A majority of shoppers (86.8%) say they purchase gifts during holiday sales to take advantage of the deals we anticipate COVID-19 will exacerbate that<sup>16</sup>.

While many associate Thanksgiving, Black Friday, and Cyber Monday sales as the big buying days of the month, the entire month sees elevated page views and order count – in 2019, page views were up 45.8% over typical and order count was up 65.9% for the month.

And that's just the starting point for the influx of holiday shopping. From our network data, we found that shoppers are starting to browse even before the turkey hits the table.

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### DUE TO COVID-19, **BUSINESSES EXPECT:**

# 61%

higher demand for their products or services during the holiday season



same demand for their products or services during the holiday season

15% lower demand for their products or services during the holiday season

### **PRE-CYBER WEEK**

Page views increased 44.4% over typical on November 11th (Veteran's Day in the United States) and 41.3% over typical on November 17th.

With these pre-Cyber Week spikes, we noticed this page view increase most frequently for products in the Apparel and Accessories, Arts and Entertainment, Health and Beauty, and Food and Beverage categories.

Our network data shows that while page views spiked significantly at the beginning and end of the week of November 11-17th, order count stays elevated the whole week at 38.5% over typical on average. Of this week, order count was highest on the 11th at 70% higher than a typical day. With Veteran's Day on the 11th, many brands and retailers kick off sales and deals ahead of the major November and December shopping days.

With shoppers looking to buy even sooner than the anticipated big sale days, there are opportunities for your brands to win over your customers early while they're on your site. You can consider offering pre-Cyber Week shopping perks, like early access to sales to those who make a purchase in a given time frame. Even just making sure that your upcoming sales, promos, and in-store experiences are prominently displayed on your site can help your shoppers convert more than once.



### **CYBER WEEK**

Once viewed as individual sales days, Thanksgiving, Black Friday, and Cyber Monday have merged into one big week o' deals. And year over year, the popularity of this shopping period is growing.

In 2019, Thanksgiving fell 6 days later than it usually does, which worried some holiday pundits. But shoppers made it clear that no matter where the holiday shopping sales fall on the calendar, they'll reach for their credit cards. For Cyber Week 2019, there were 15.7% more page views than 2018, 6.1% more orders, and 8.0% more questions were submitted in that time period alone.

Remember – questions are one of the final steps before a shopper buys your product.

We recommend dedicating extra resources during Cyber Week to respond to questions in a timely manner.

# **Increases in questions and order count during Cyber Week 2019**

Cyber Week 2019 compared to a typical shopping day in September



Source: Bazaarvoice Network Data

Though the full week of Thanksgiving through Cyber Monday boasts higher than typical orders and page views, Black Friday is still the biggest day for both. Compared to a typical shopping day in September, order count was up 431.2% and page views were up 213.5%.

### Increases in order count by category during Black Friday 2019



Source: Bazaarvoice Network Data

# Increases in order count by category during Cyber Monday 2019



Source: Bazaarvoice Network Data

While originally seen as an in-store shopping event, Black Friday has largely transitioned to an online sales event with a few still willing to brave the stores for in-store deals. 2019 marked the third year in a row of declining foot traffic to brickand-mortar stores and simultaneous increase in e-commerce revenue<sup>17</sup>.

# The second biggest day of orders on our network was Cyber Monday,

with a 364.8% increase over typical. For both Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Apparel and Accessories was the most-purchased category.

### **BEYOND CYBER WEEK**

While buying behavior slows down slightly compared to the massive spikes seen during Cyber Week, there are still elevated order counts through December until Christmas Eve. From December 7th-14th, orders stayed roughly 97% above typical. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day see fewer orders than a typical day, but orders pick back up on the 26th as shoppers are ready to start spending cash and gift cards.

One noticeable shopping behavior on Christmas Day is that for the shoppers still making purchases, they're doing it largely on mobile. 65% of orders on **Christmas Day are done on mobile**, compared to only about 53.5% of orders happening on mobile on a typical day. This is the biggest day for mobile shopping on our network.

Looking past Christmas, our network saw Health and Beauty, Apparel and Accessories, Food and Beverage, Arts and Entertainment, and Sporting Goods have a noticeable uptick in order count on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas.

For businesses looking to connect with as many shoppers as possible, we recommend starting promotions early and extending them later. Sales aren't strictly tied to the major sale holidays - don't be afraid to start advertising deals early in November and cut last-minute gift givers a break with additional promotions in December. For example, a tactic that Old Navy uses year round is their Super Cash promotion. When you spend a certain amount with them, you earn a coupon redeemable for cash value in their store at a later date. A program like this could not only encourage consumers to shop early with you, but also come back later and spend more than they planned.



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# **PURCHASE A GIFT CARD!**

# January

Shopping doesn't end when the holiday lights get packed away. Many shoppers are still eager to spend - some with gifted money or others who feel like they can now treat themselves after they've treated family and friends.

The Media category (which includes books, DVDs, videotapes, and magazines) had a noticeable order count spike in January – there was a 54% increase in the average daily order count from January compared to the last half of December. Surprisingly, Sporting Goods did not have a noticeable increase in shopping activity despite the fact that many New Year's resolutions focus on health and wellness.

And while a significant number of shoppers will go in-store after the holidays with the intent to make a return - 65% of shoppers make their holiday returns inperson<sup>18</sup> – this also puts them in a position to spend more when they're in your store. In fact, 75% of shoppers will usually buy more than what drew them to the store in the first place<sup>19</sup>. This means while shoppers may be there to exchange a shirt or set of pots and pans, they'll be willing to spend more if a more expensive item catches their eye instead. After all, it's easier to justify a \$100 purchase when \$80 of that was a gift from someone else.

I've had this for a little over four years now and I absolutely love it. I also love that it has a sort of vintage/rustic feel to it.



# While additional in-store spending is a silver lining for holiday returns, it's understandable that significant returns can pose an issue for your bottom line. One of the best things you can do to proactively reduce returns during the holidays is to mine user-generated content and customer questions for common themes - ahead of the holiday rush - and use that information to update your product pages accordingly. While it can be hard to guess what type of headphones to get for your aunt who likes to listen to music while she exercises, if the product page makes it clear that they are built for long runs, they'll stay put, and they're sweat resistant, it's more likely they'll meet your expectations.

Additionally, to prevent fraudulent returns or excessive returns, consider tightening your return policy if it's lax or only offer store credit instead of cashback<sup>20</sup>. While lax return policies can promote higher conversion, it's also been found to increase the number of stolen items being returned as well.







# **Post-holiday**

The last return was processed, and your storefront has returned to normal. You may find yourself asking, "Now what?"

Now is the ideal time to do a post-mortem on how this holiday season went for your business.

Taking the time to evaluate your holiday season in late January and early February can better support the decisions you'll make for next year's holiday season. It's easier to do it while the information and outcomes are fresh, and it gives you ample time to prepare for next year's season.

Keep in mind, it's not just about product performance. Take this opportunity to identify areas where your business could've better utilized UGC, responded to customers online, updated product pages based on feedback, and more. Just as you audited your UGC in July, this time period is a great one to run an audit again.

Que	Stions to ask when
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	HOW DID WE USE UGC WE
	HOW COULD WE HAVE US MARKETING?
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# **Questions to ask when reflecting on holiday:**

SUCCESSFUL?

**E BETTER BEEN EXECUTED?** 

AL MISS?

**MED WELL?** 

**MED POORLY?** 

OULD HAVE DONE TO IMPROVE ?

ELL FOR HOLIDAY MARKETING?

ED UGC BETTER FOR HOLIDAY

SAME NEXT YEAR?

FERENTLY NEXT YEAR?

# **Prep Checklist**

July	1	August/September	October	November/December
	<ul> <li>Run a UGC inventory on your product pages</li> <li>Where are customer reviews and photos lacking?</li> <li>Are there popular products without UGC?</li> <li>Are there products you're planning to push that need UGC?</li> <li>What products did you wish you had more UGC on product pages on after last year's holiday season?</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Close out your content collection campaigns</li> <li>Refer back to your earlier UGC inventory and identify any gaps that still exist</li> <li>Solicit customer feedback to make up for any existing gaps</li> <li>Send an email to your CRM list</li> <li>Include a call for reviews</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Use customer questions to update or build FAQs on product pages</li> <li>Keep product descriptions up to date for easier research for shoppers</li> <li>Outline a plan for answering customer questions quickly once holiday shopping picks up</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Begin sales and promotions ahead of Cyber Week like deals separate from Cyber Week or early access on your site</li> <li>Promote your Cyber We plans</li> <li>Execute on customer support plans</li> </ul>
	Turn on a post-interaction email (PIE) for all purchases	in packaging - Run a sweepstakes or promotion	Finalize site plans and implement code freezes	Continue to run deals int December, both leading up to and after Christma
	Send a reachback PIE to past customers on all or specific products	<ul> <li>Launch hashtag campaigns</li> <li>Respond to all customer reviews and questions</li> </ul>	Identify online sales opportunities for your business	Advertise the last day fo fulfillment to guarantee delivery before Christma
	Based on your UGC inventory and planned product launches, launch a content collection campaign			

	January		
5	Run promotions that speak to gift card spending or the new year		
on Veek	Identify return patterns and plan how to reduce them next year		

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# Conclusion

While holiday shopping may look a little different this year, now is still the time to build your marketing strategies and get your UGC into place. Shopping behaviors may have shifted, but shoppers are still eager to buy gifts for loved ones.

Focus on creating an experience, both online and offline, that will put shoppers in the holiday spirit. Taking the time to plan now will reward your business later. After all, building a plan is the first step to a successful execution.



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# **About Bazaarvoice**

Each month in the Bazaarvoice Network, more than a billion consumers create, view, and share authentic user-generated content including reviews, questions and answers, and social photos across more than 6,200 global brand and retailer websites. From search and discovery to purchase and advocacy, Bazaarvoice's solutions help brands and retailers reach in-market shoppers, personalize their experiences, and give them the confidence to buy.

Founded in 2005, Bazaarvoice is headquartered in Austin, Texas, with offices in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia. For more information, visit **www.bazaarvoice.com**.

