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Bargains not just for Black Friday anymore

Karen Dybis, Special to The Detroit News November 23, 2016



(Photo: Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)

Smartphones, online shopping and “sneak peek” discounting has changed Black Friday from the door-bustin’ shopping brawl of old to a more toned-down event, reshaping how retailers appeal to consumers on the day that still serves as the annual kick-off for the holiday shopping season.

The old days of waiting until the Friday after Thanksgiving for the best bargains is long gone. For example, online superstore Amazon.com launched its Black Friday Deals Store Nov. 1. Meijer Inc. of Grand Rapids launched its specials Sunday, a week before Black Friday, and included its Thanksgiving Day sales and Saturday specials.

Macy’s gave its shoppers a Black Friday sales preview starting Nov. 17. Consumers — who are now experts at comparison shopping— have eliminated Black Friday as the busiest shopping day of the

year, said Andrea Schwartz, a Macy's regional vice president of media relations and cause marketing.

"They don't show up with their sales fliers; they pull up the ads on their smartphones instead," Schwartz said. "They come with a list in mind and they just want to get their shopping done."

Nearly six in 10 Americans or an estimated 137.4 million people plan to or are considering shopping during Thanksgiving weekend, according to National Retail Federation's annual survey conducted by Prosper Insights. Black Friday is still the most popular day to shop across all age groups, the Washington-based trade association found. An estimated 74 percent of Americans say they plan to shop that day, the same as in 2015.

But don't expect 4 a.m. wake-up calls, small supplies and cranky bargain hunters. As the long lines, bruising crowds and hype fades, the more modern version of Black Friday will be a softer one. Ken Dalto, founder and owner at Kenneth J. Dalto & Associates, a business and retail consulting business in Bingham Farms, says Black Friday just isn't the cultural event it used to be.

"Retailers have completely transformed their whole business," Dalto said. "A quarter of their holiday sales are from online. They've started discounting so much earlier. Advertising is down. The whole thing has been diluted."

Retailers also have a better grasp of buying and most have a "just in time" inventory system that makes massive sales like those on Black Friday less necessary, Dalto added. Plus, he noted, Amazon.com has lowered prices on goods across the board, and most stores have realized that price-matching has to be a regular offering.

Still, some part of Black Friday always will remain. For example, shopping centers will continue to use that day after Thanksgiving as the start of the holidays, putting up decorations and bringing in Santa for pictures. "This isn't Scrooge retail; there still will be lights and music," Dalto said.

That's not to say that retailers won't create special promotions to get their share of the Black Friday action. Diane Harris, owner of downtown Birmingham jewelry and accessories boutique My House of Style, is offering shoppers 25 percent off one piece of fashion jewelry starting Friday. Belle Tire also will have one of its most aggressive sales on Black Friday, knowing that it remains one of the Allen Park-based chain's busiest days of the year.

"We are always looking for opportunities to be the guy giving our customers the most bang for their buck," said Belle Tire president Don Barnes III. "We know our customers have a long shopping list and saving is a priority for them."

Schwartz said Macy's considers Friday one of the "most entertaining days of the year in terms of crowds." Store associates greet the first customers by lining the aisles and clapping for those early

birds, she said. Shoppers also show up in matching holiday sweaters and turkey hats, making the day memorable for all.

And, as always, if you see something you want or know that a toy is in hot demand, buy it earlier than later, Schwartz advises. "Get it before it's gone," she said.

Doorbusters, personal shoppers and in-store pickup for online orders are key to Macy's strategy this year. Macy's kicked off its sales preview in stores and online on Wednesday, hoping to create a seamless shopping experience between its website and stores. Thursday evening, Macy's will launch doorbuster specials that include \$7.99 toasters, \$19.99 boots and \$39.99 cashmere sweaters. "You just can't beat that," Schwartz said.

No matter how good the deals may seem, the bottom line on Black Friday should be "buyer beware," warns Steve Siebold, author of "How Rich People Think," who has interviewed more than 1,200 of the world's wealthiest people over the past 30 years. Siebold said he believes people get too emotional during the gift-giving season and should stick to buying only what they can afford this holiday.

"Mental toughness is really needed for the holiday season because it's a mass manipulation from Madison Avenue," Siebold said. "Most Americans don't have the spending money for all of the toys, clothes and everything else they convince you to buy."

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