

Retailers ready for 'Black Friday'

Heavy-spending shoppers should expect lines, heavy traffic; shops to open early

*BY WAYNE T. PRICE
FLORIDA TODAY*

Retailers this year, more so than in the past, want shopping to be early and easier.

On the Space Coast, and across the nation, shopping malls and individual stores are opening their doors well before the sun comes up, with many planning to offer special early-bird sales and providing urns of fresh coffee to entice consumers to spend more money.

The day after Thanksgiving -- more commonly known as "Black Friday" -- is among the busiest shopping days of the year for retailers. For shoppers, the day practically has become a national event, as it marks the period when many consumers begin buying gifts for the holidays -- although others already are well along on their Christmas shopping.

A survey released this week by Consumer Reports estimated 62.7 million adults -- 30 percent -- plan to go shopping sometime Friday, up from 26 percent who said they shopped on the Friday after Thanksgiving last year.

And one in seven -- 14 percent -- plan to wait in line for early-morning sales, according to the survey.

Predictions differ, but with unemployment low and gas prices still down from six months ago, many retail analysts anticipate a modest increase in spending compared with last year's level.

But the earlier-than-normal store openings indicate retailers are competing harder for shoppers' attention -- and their dollars.

"Consumers are beginning to demand more from retailers and are making a conscious decision about where to shop based on their expectations for good service," said Tracy Mullin, president of the National Retail Federation.

Wal-Mart may have the edge, as it does in many things involving retail.

The 24-hour Wal-Mart Supercenters don't plan on closing at all this year, except for Christmas Day.

Archival Target is opening at 6 a.m. Friday.

Melbourne Square mall, owned by the Simon Property Group, said it would open its doors at 5 a.m. Friday.

Individual retailers will open between 5 and 6 a.m.

Merritt Square Mall opens its doors at 7 a.m., with individual stores opening earlier.

At The Avenue Viera, all stores will be required to open no later than 7 a.m., said Diane Slotnick, property manager.

Early risers

Jennifer Guise of Palm Bay plans to enter the retail maelstrom early Friday, with shopping excursions planned for Toys 'R' Us, Target and Wal-Mart to buy gifts for her son, niece and nephew.

She's not worried about crowds.

"Where I'm going, people are pretty friendly," Guise said. "Plus, I'm not going to buy any big-ticket items that there's a big rush over."

Greg and Nicqueleen Parsons of Melbourne normally aren't ones for Black Friday shopping, but this year is different.

"This year, we decided it might be a good idea to take advantage of some of the deals," Greg Parsons said, adding he'll probably find himself at Best Buy when it opens at 5 a.m.

"We got three kids, and we need another computer," Parsons said.

Merritt Island dentist Gary Herbeck has earned quite a reputation with family and friends for getting up early and hitting the stores.

"The first stop is Best Buy, and, after that, Circuit City," Herbeck said. "After that, we just take it from there."

Herbeck said he sees "the worst in people and also see the best in people, people who are very helpful" on Black Friday.

"I've even met people who have become my patients," Herbeck said.

Mia Snow of Melbourne has two words about shopping on the Friday after Thanksgiving: "Absolutely not."

"Most of the deals are at 6 a.m., or something like that," said Snow, who said she probably would do her power shopping the following weekend.

"I just don't want to deal with the traffic and all that."

Traffic certainly is expected, particularly at intersections near the malls, the major discount retailers like Target and Wal-Mart, and The Avenue Viera.

"From what I hear, the traffic gets crazy at this corner," said John Imbriano, manager at the Best Buy in Melbourne, next to a Sports Authority on Evans Road and across the street from Melbourne Square mall.

What may be even a little crazier is that people probably will begin standing in line Thanksgiving Day for the Best Buy sales on electronics -- probably 12 hours or more before the store opens.

"I guess some people find that fun," Imbriano said.

Best Buy opens at 5 a.m. Friday.

At 4 a.m., store personnel will pass out vouchers for some of the items expected to be top sellers.

Too much hype?

Some analysts wonder whether the concept of "Black Friday" isn't a bit overhyped, particularly considering the larger role that online shopping is expected to play this year.

The day will be busy, but just how important a day it is may be questionable.

"Black Friday is becoming more and more irrelevant to the overall success of most retailers," said Doug Fleener, president and managing partner of Dynamic Experiences Group, a Boston-area retail consulting firm.

"As the big-box retailers slug it out on Black Friday," Fleener said, "the mall stores and other specialty retailers are less dependent on this day than in years past."

Contact Price at 242-3658 or wprice@flatoday.net
