



No proof Thanksgiving openings boost sales

By **DEAN CALBREATH**, The Daily Transcript
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At 6 p.m. Thanksgiving, an hour when many families are sitting around the dinner table, enjoying their turkey and potatoes, most of the biggest retailers in San Diego will be luring customers with the deep discounts that were once associated with Black Friday.

As recently as two or three years ago, most shoppers camped out in long lines at malls and retailers' parking lots, waiting for the midnight bewitching hour when Black Friday sales began.

But this year, the vast majority of major retailers, ranging from the Las Americas Premium Outlets near the border in San Ysidro to the Westfield North County mall in Escondido, will be open by dinnertime on Thursday, capping a monthlong wave of sales and discounts aimed at jump-starting the holiday shopping season.

"There have been so many sales this month, it's getting hard to tell where Black Friday begins and ends," said George Belch, marketing professor at San Diego State University. "Whether it's Black Friday, Small-Business Saturday or Cyber Monday, marketers have been trying to create a lot of different events and rationales for driving retail traffic into the stores."

The most controversial sales, however, are the ones on Thanksgiving Day, especially after news reports that some stores across the nation aren't giving their employees the option of staying home with their families.

Most consumers don't like the move. A poll last year by Consumer Reports found that 61 percent of consumers felt nonessential stores should not open on Thanksgiving.

Even among people who shopped on Thanksgiving Day last year, 42 percent said they "strongly agreed" that the stores should not have opened.

Some major chains, including Barnes & Noble, Costco, Crate and Barrel, DSW Shoes, Home Depot, Lowe's, Marshall's, Nordstrom and REI, have bucked the trend by waiting until at least midnight to begin their sales.

"Our employees work especially hard during the holiday season and we simply believe that they deserve the opportunity to spend Thanksgiving with their families," a Costco representative said.

Nevertheless, Kmart, which pioneered Thanksgiving Day sales several years ago, will open its doors at 6 a.m. Thursday, followed by Big Lots at 7 a.m. and RadioShack at 8 a.m.

Other stores will at least give employees a chance to enjoy an afternoon Thanksgiving meal, with Michael's Arts & Crafts opening at 4 p.m.; Best Buy, Toys R Us, J.C. Penney and Stein Mart at 5 p.m.; and Walmart, Sears, Macy's, Kohl's and most local shopping malls opening at 6 p.m.

But instead of those sales coming at the leading edge of Black Friday, they are actually at the tail end of a month that is beginning to be known as Black November among retailers, referring to how the holiday shopping season can magically turn the ink on their balance sheets from red for losses to black for profits.

As early as Nov. 1, Walmart was touting “doorbuster” sales on electronics, even though there were no Black Friday-like crowds vying to bust down the doors.

By the middle of the month, most of the retailers in Fashion Valley were offering deep discounts and buy-one-get-one-free or half-off sales, in prelude to the sales they would offer on Thanksgiving or Black Friday.

"Black Friday deals start now," officials from the H&M clothing store said in mid-November. The company slashed prices by up to 70 percent in a sale lasting through Thanksgiving.

Office supply retailer Staples, meanwhile, declared that the Sunday through Wednesday before Thanksgiving would constitute its Black Friday for Business, even though none of those days was, in reality, a Friday.

But as soon as that Black Friday ends, the next sale is slated to begin, with a new set of sales starting at 6 p.m. Thursday.

Belch said it is debatable whether such redefinitions of Black Friday will make the retailers' ink much blacker.

"None of these activities result in sales going through the roof," he said. "In the end, it's hard to tell if their overall sales are any different than they otherwise might have been, since these pre-Black Friday sales may be just shifting the timing of sales that the stores would have otherwise made."

Although incursions into Thanksgiving have been building gradually since 2010, there is little evidence that they affect the total number of sales.

Last year, nearly 45 million Americans shopped in stores or online on Thanksgiving Day in 2013, up 27 percent from 2012, according to the latest data from the National Retail Federation.

But the overall number of people who shopped during the four-day Thanksgiving weekend rose only 0.5 percent -- not even matching the population growth over the year -- suggesting that the earlier opening hours merely shifted the shoppers' habits instead of creating new consumers.

Meanwhile, retail sales during the week before Christmas -- typically exceeded only by the Black Friday weekend as the second-busiest time of year -- dropped 3.1 percent last year.

In a report at that time, Sam Sisakhti, chief executive of fashion retailer USTrendy, suggested that the main reason for the drop-off was the expansion of Black Friday, both in its hours and in the depth of the price-cutting.

“The sales ... have swooned shoppers into earlier purchases,” he wrote. “The downside has been the associated dips in shopping toward the end of the retail season.”

Belch said the main reason retailers make the switch is to keep up with their rivals.

“Everyone starts out by saying, ‘No, we’re not going to start our sales that early.’ But when a competitor does, they end up saying, ‘They’ll be getting sales that we’re not going to get.’ And it spirals from there,” Belch said.

Does that mean that special discounts on Thanksgiving and Black Friday might someday disappear, as the sales shift to earlier in the month?

“Starting these sales so early has the potential of diminishing the importance of Black Friday, but it’s very unlikely it will just go away,” Belch said. “It’ll continue to be a big event, if only because so many people have Friday as a day off. And marketers say some people view it as a way of getting out of the house when they get bored with their relatives.”