

Black Friday shopping for the brave, determined

Daily Herald staff writer Erin Holmes shares her experience and advice as a self-described shopaholic in her blog "Empty Wallet - Fashion" at www.beepcentral.com.

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Today marks one year since I decided, in a turkey-induced delirium, to take Woodfield Shopping Center up on its offer of showing up in pajamas before 5 a.m. on Black Friday to snag a \$50 gift certificate.

The catch? I had to be one of the first 100 or so people in line.

Suffice it to say I wasn't - my biggest mistake apparently being that I actually went to bed the night before rather than waiting in line all night.

I left the mall parking lot about 4:45 a.m. - pajama-clad, empty-handed and vividly aware I was out of my league in this post-Thanksgiving Day retail rush.

The most practiced holiday shoppers, it turns out, are educated, dedicated, relentless, skilled at finding the good deals and, above all, determined.

You can be, too.

Here are some tips - culled from retail pros, expert shoppers and personal experience - for competing with the crowds. Beware, though, and brace yourself: Being truly successful on Black Friday is not for the meek.

Be realistic: Black Friday, so called because it kicks off a season that can send retailers' budgets into the black, has earned the daunting distinction of being among the biggest shopping days of the year - if not in terms of dollars spent, at least in terms of foot traffic.

Realize and accept the fact that you cannot get in, get out and get what you need in under an hour. Or, probably, under eight hours.

That said, have a game plan: Know where you're going, and go armed with lists of what you need. Most malls have store directories and maps online, allowing shoppers to plan a precise route before arriving.

Laura Siebold, a fashion expert and owner of LiveStyle in Streamwood, also suggests calling ahead to stores to see if they have the item you're after.

If they don't, don't bother.

Do your research: There's a cornucopia of Web sites aimed at easing the Black Friday trauma by offering price comparisons and a preview of the deals you'll find in stores. So, you can scout out the season's must-haves before you plunge into the crowds.

The site listed as the "official" Black Friday page is at blackfriday.gottadeal.com; that one lets you check out the top deals at your stores of choice.

At www.sortprice.com, you can get an idea of which stores (online or old-fashioned brick-and-mortar) offer the best prices for specific items.

Too complicated? Check out individual store Web sites. Many - including Wal-Mart - have posted bargain previews for you to peruse in advance. Many mall sites do the same.

A few more worth trying: www.pricegrabber.com, www.deal hunting.com, www.couponcabin.com, Google offshoot www.froogle.com, and www.keepcash.com.

Clip coupons: There's no shame in being thrifty. Check out the ads - they'll likely be spilling out of your newspaper today like stuffing from a turkey - and bring them along as you shop. There's a good chance many stores will match advertised prices, even if they didn't print the flier.

Make a budget: And stick to it. Know how much you can afford before things get out of hand. If you happen to find an item on your list for a few bucks less than you thought, bank that extra cash - don't simply buy extra things just for the sake of hitting your target, says Brad Stroh, co-CEO of bills.com.

Be wise: If you spot an item that would please several folks on your list, buy a lot of it and save yourself the hassle of waiting in multiple lines, suggests author Jeff Davidson, whose books (fittingly) include "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Your Time." And if a store offers gift-wrapping - for free - go for it. "You'll know it was the right decision when you get home and realize you have one less thing to do," Davidson says.

Avoid fatigue: Just as you would in any other marathon, take breaks and drink water. If the shopping center you're at offers lockers, hand over the quarter it takes to rent one and store your purchases there rather than juggling bags all day. (Bonus: This eliminates the fear that a thief has spotted you storing the bags in your trunk as you head back into the mall). If possible, Davidson also suggests sticking to smaller gifts like CDs and jewelry rather than weighty gadgets that could prove tough to carry.

Be a rebel: Try walking against the normal foot traffic in a crowded mall rather than trudging along with the rest of the shopping lemmings. The hordes generally will let you through if you're pushy.

Arrive early: Many stores save their biggest bargains for shoppers who arrive earliest - usually before 10 or 11 a.m. - so plan accordingly and keep in mind most stores open much earlier than normal. Big-boxes like Wal-Mart and Best Buy will crack open their doors at the bleary-eyed hour of 5 a.m., offering substantial savings on a variety of big-ticket electronics and, in Wal-Mart's case, toys.

... or even earlier: The really brave - or the really crazy - can get an added jump start on things in Friday's wee hours. Chicago Premium Outlets in Aurora will bust out the first of its bargains at 12:01 a.m., and Spring Hill Mall in West Dundee will kick off its holiday shopping season at 1 a.m. If you can stomach shopping at that hour (the crowds may be as bad), officials promise it'll be worth the lost sleep.

Know you can shop later: By the same token, there will be plenty of deals to go around all holiday season (honestly), so figure out if you're really up to battling the Friday crowds. If not, do your shopping another day; most stores will offer extended hours all season long, and malls tend to be fairly empty on weekday mornings.

Head off disappointment: Decide in advance if that \$10-off coupon - or free trinket - you'll get if you're one of the first 50 or so customers in line at a given store really is worth it. If not, don't rush. Also, figure there's a good chance you won't be one of the first people in line, anyway, no matter how early you get up.

Be strategic: One trick, expert Doug Fleener says, is to weigh the savings against the odds of actually getting the bargain. For example, he says, Wal-Mart last year offered a low price on laptops but offered only a handful in each store. "The odds of getting the laptop and surviving to use it was quite low," jokes Fleener, the president of an East Coast retail consulting firm.

He notes a better strategy would be to find a laptop elsewhere. Even if it's pricier, he says, you have a better chance of snagging it.

Skip the mall: The pros suggest ditching those retail meccas in favor of a few stores off the regularly beaten path. Try free-standing editions of your favorite mall stores.

Another good option: small retailers just down the street in your own town. They tend to offer unique merchandise and a less hectic atmosphere, along with a dose of friendliness sorely lacking this time of year.

Shop entirely online: Skip Black Friday and opt instead for Cyber Monday - the Monday after Thanksgiving, when thousands in America will log on to the Web to shop online.

You'll miss out on those cute holiday mall decorations, but you'll also avoid the sore feet.

Some sites offer free shipping and have on-the-spot price comparisons or coupons, all but guaranteeing a deal. Plus, the goods can be delivered directly to your door. Try fatwallet.com and ebates.com for cash-back incentives, deals of the day and much more.

And then relish the fact that you're outsmarting the crowds.

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