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Experts offer shopping survival tips

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Shopping Tips

Arrive early - or shop late.

Make a list.

Know the layout of stores.

Bring a bottle of water.

Make sure you ask stores about their return policies; keep receipts and get gift receipts.

If possible, make car package drop-offs so you're not dragging your purchases all over the mall.

Lock purchases in the trunk, rather than in plain view.

Layer your clothing for comfort and wear comfortable shoes.

Pick up a mall directory, which will tell you where stores - and bathrooms - are.

Don't try to do all your shopping at once.

Figure out an overall budget and a budget for each gift.

Use the day as a way to find out what other shoppers would like for themselves.

Ask about sales and holiday promotions.

Use sales associates as resources - many have worked in department stores for years and know what the stores have to offer.

Today is "Black Friday."

Really. That's what retailers call the day after Thanksgiving.

Plenty of people who hate shopping call it that, too. In many ways, it is an unappealingly busy day to shop. But the millions of people who will crowd malls and Wal-Marts, Radio Shacks and Targets today like the crowds. They like the post-Thanksgiving ritual.

Retailers do, too, which is why it's called "Black Friday."

"It's the day that retailers went from being in the red to being in the black," explained Ellen Tolley of the National Retail Federation, the world's largest retail trade association.

Although the Saturdays leading up to Christmas are traditionally the biggest days in terms of sales, the day after Thanksgiving may be the busiest in terms of customers

going through stores, said Robin Reibel, a spokeswoman for Filene's, the department store.

She and others said shopping today can be fun, and offered suggestions to make it even more so - or, for those who dread the crowds, a touch less painful.

Ellyne Fleshner, a spokeswoman for the Maine Mall, said holiday shopping is like holiday traveling: arrive early for a better experience.

A few stores at the Maine Mall, such as The Disney Store, will open at 5 a.m. Others, such as The Sports Authority, will open at 5:30, while others, such as Filene's and Macy's, will open at 6 a.m.

Fleshner said she expects today will be "robust" at the mall.

Because today is forecast to be cold, Fleshner suggested people layer their clothing. That way, they can remove their outerwear and be comfortable inside the heated mall.

She said the parking lot at Gorham and Philbrook roads, near the Weathervane restaurant, tends to be the least crowded. Maine Mall security offers escorts to parked vehicles.

Susan Zwerblis, a personal shopper at Nordstrom, a national chain of upscale department stores, said she sort of likes the day after Thanksgiving.

"It's a day that people get really geared up," said Zwerblis, who works in the Providence, R.I., Nordstrom. "The stores are always filled with lots of exciting merchandise and good spirits."

She said people should not get overwhelmed.

"You don't have to accomplish it all on Friday," she said. "If you break it down and you have a plan and you have that one goal to accomplish and you do it that day, you can leave with a good, positive experience."

Plan, for example, to buy gifts for women first. That way, you don't have to go to the same departments over and over again.

She suggested that people shop early for people who live out of town. That way, they can ship the gifts early. She suggested, too, that as soon as people buy gifts, they wrap them - or have them wrapped - and write out gift cards.

"That experience for that person is done," she said.

Rich Donaldson, a spokesman for L.L. Bean, said shoppers at the Freeport store don't have to worry about shopping early or late. The mammoth shop is open 24 hours a day.

He said he expects today to be hopping, but said people shouldn't worry. Extra workers will be on duty to help things go smoothly. Checkout lines should be manageable because baggers will work alongside cashiers.

He said shoppers should head out with the right mind-set, with a fully charged cell phone - and without a bulky purse.

"Ditch the purse or the big wallet," he said. "Simplify what you'll need."

Without a purse, it's easier to carry packages.

Mary Ellen Camire, a professor of food science and human nutrition at the University of Maine, suggested some things to carry: a bottle of water and a granola bar. She noted that malls offer all sorts of fattening temptations.

Have breakfast before shopping, she said.

Reibel, the Filene's spokeswoman, said customers are welcome to bring bottles of water into stores.

She said many general managers will allow customers to store coats or packages in their offices.

There are, of course, those who don't like to shop on Black Friday.

Among them: Michelle Sterling, a personal shopper and style consultant with Global Image Group, a San Francisco-based company with offices in New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, London and Hong Kong.

"But everybody goes and does it because it's more like a family thing - you go out and you buy presents and you spend time together."

She said, however, that the day is a good time to find out what family members would like for themselves.

If, for example, someone sees a family member coveting a particular item, it's a good bet the item would be a welcome gift.

She also said there are ways to avoid the malls today.

One of the easiest ways to buy is online, she said.

She suggested overstock.com for discount buys, target.com for a range of items, and eBay, saks.com, nordstrom.com, neimanmarcus.com, and macys.com for others.

L.L. Bean has a Web site, as well, as do most retail stores.

Drew Herdener, a spokesman for amazon.com, said "there's nothing outside of getting a picture with Santa" that the online retailer can't deliver.

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