

# Black Friday: On your mark, get set, go!

November 18 2009

---

(PhysOrg.com) -- For most Americans, Thanksgiving Day means a flurry of food, family and football. But the real frenzy begins the day after, say researchers at the University of Michigan and Western Michigan University.

"Just as turkey and pumpkin pie are associated with [Thanksgiving](#), the day after has become synonymous with one thing—shopping," said David Wooten, associate professor of marketing at the U-M Ross School of Business. "Black Friday has become an annual consumption event with more than 60 million people braving the elements, snarled parking lots, hours waiting and early morning crowds to shop on a day that has come to signal the beginning of the Christmas shopping season."

New ethnographic research by Wooten and colleague Robert Harrison of Western Michigan University explores the competitive aspects and game-like characteristics of Black Friday shopping, the motivations and behaviors of shoppers and the implications for retailers.

Using data (observations, field notes and interviews) from retail managers and more than 200 families in 19 states, the researchers identify two kinds of Black Friday shoppers: competitors and spectators.

Some competitors are experienced shoppers who are extremely organized and characterized by a singular focus on acquiring as many of the heavily discounted items on their shopping lists as possible before retailers run out of stock. They do very little browsing or socializing with other shoppers.

Other competitors may lack the experience or intensity possessed by more aggressive shoppers, but they still have a passion for finding great bargains, the researchers say.

"These casual competitors may have a list of desired objects, but they also have realistic expectations about their chances of competing successfully against other shoppers," Wooten said. "As a result, they do not allow their enjoyment of the event to hinge solely on their ability to acquire targeted merchandise."

Spectators, on the other hand, are part of the game, but not the competition, Wooten and Harrison say. They do not plan, rush or wait in lines for stores to open.

"They are like fans, but without rooting interests," said Harrison, WMU assistant professor of marketing. "They come to consume the spectacle that is co-produced by retailers and competitive shoppers."

Regardless of the category of shopper, Black Friday is viewed by most as a competitive event. Many participants point to drastic price reductions and limited selections of feature merchandise as sources of competitive pressures. They also allude to heightened states of arousal and feelings of glory in response to entering stores, locating bargains and beating other shoppers out of coveted items.

Like the football games that many Americans watch on Thanksgiving Day, the Black Friday shopping game also has rules (no line-cutting, item hoarding or stealing from others), strategies for winning (devising game plans, organizing shopping teams, outmaneuvering opponents) and phases of the game (pre-shopping planning, waiting and hunting).

"Much of the planning phase occurs in off-field areas like living room floors or kitchen tables days before the scheduled event," Harrison said.

"Would-be shoppers search for information about products, prices and retail outlets and make decisions about what to buy, when to buy it, from which stores and with whom."

The waiting phase also happens primarily in off-field areas (in lines) near the playing field (the store) and shortly before the competition begins (when the store opens), the researchers say.

"Competitors tend to be skilled at acquiring and protecting favorable positions in line and are careful not to reveal specific plans to others," Harrison said. "As the waiting phase nears an end and the time to open doors approaches, shoppers jockey for position in order to improve or protect their chances of acquiring desired merchandise."

The hunting phase, which takes place in on-field areas (the stores), is marked by overzealous shoppers sprinting toward a desired item, pushing their way past other customers to get to the merchandise and often wresting items from other unsuspecting shoppers. Competitive shoppers also use team members to fan out and get other items and then meet another team member who's already holding a place in line.

"Meanwhile, spectators express amusement at the prospect of witnessing the melees that ensue when low inventories of popular items offered at discount prices transform complete strangers into bitter rivals, at least for this event," Harrison said.

During (and before) the Black Friday shopping fervor, opportunities abound for retailers to connect with consumers at different phases of the competition, the researchers say. For example, advertising "deals" in advance is a must, as well as having adequate staffing levels, efficient layouts and reputations for speedy service. While shoppers are waiting in line, retailers can offer refreshments, distribute fliers featuring unadvertised bargains and provide customers with applications for store

credit cards or rewards programs.

"In all, Black Friday is like grocery shopping because it involves planned purchases of multiple items for multiple parties during a single trip," Wooten said. "However, compared to grocery shopping, Black Friday shopping usually involves more shopping destinations, more expensive goods, higher levels of involvement, a more visible group effort, greater time pressure and more limited availability of desired goods. These factors are likely to shape the Black Friday shopping experience through their effects on motivations, feelings, behaviors and outcomes."

Provided by University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Black Friday: On your mark, get set, go! (2009, November 18) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-11-black-friday.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--