

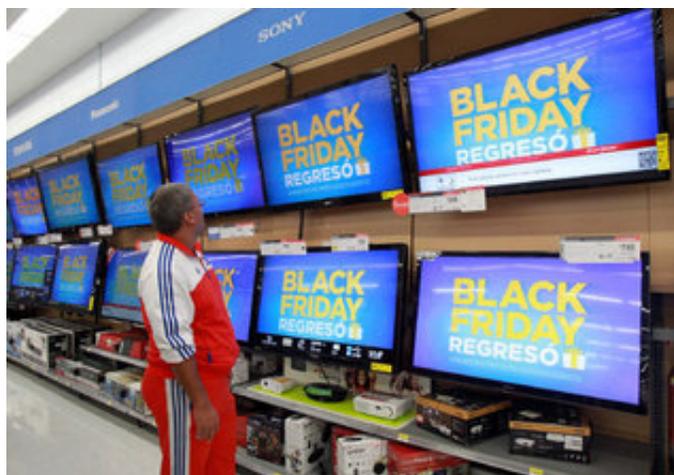
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Black Friday is creeping into Thanksgiving evening

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PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

German Alvarez of Hialeah shops for TVs that are advertising Black Friday sales as folks prepare for the holidays at the Walmart in Doral Tuesday, November 20, 2012.

Marling Sequeira has her Thanksgiving all planned: turkey, trimmings and pumpkin pie at her boyfriend's in Miami, then a moonlit drive to Walmart to snag a 72-inch Samsung TV on sale for \$800.

"It's more exciting at midnight," said Sequeira, 22, a medical assistant who is moving into a new Brickell-area apartment with her boyfriend on Friday. "Besides that, the specials are more convenient."

All over South Florida on Thursday, bargain-hungry shoppers will be gobbling down their Thanksgiving meals with an eye on heading to the mall.

Thursday is becoming the new Black Thursday, as the old-fashioned kickoff day of the holiday, Black Friday, creeps into Thanksgiving dessert.

"Retailers are now commercializing Thanksgiving, giving the opportunity to the consumer who doesn't want to watch 12 hours of football," said Marshal Cohen, chief retail analyst at the NPD Group, a consumer and retail market research firm based in Port Washington, N.Y.

The stores' goal, he said, is to compete more vigorously with online sites for those valuable early holiday dollars.

And retailers have learned that if they open their doors and offer deals, shoppers will come. Last year those who extended their hours saw sales rise up to 22 percent for the Black Friday weekend, while those retailers that did not lost up to 8 percent, Cohen said.

The result: this year, more than ever, shopping is seeping into Thanksgiving festivities.

Kmart is opening at 6 a.m. and Bass Pro Shops at 8 a.m. on Thursday. Sears and Toys"R"Us are opening at 8 p.m. Target is opening at 9 p.m. Loads of stores, including Macy's, The Gap, Old Navy and Best Buy are opening at midnight. Best Buy is promising deals on such items as TVs, laptop computers, digital cameras and more.

Walmart is open 24 hours, so it will stay open all day on Thanksgiving, with specials offered at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. on Thursday and 5 a.m. on Friday.

“Whether you want to stay up late on Thursday night or get up early on Friday, at Walmart we have a Black Friday event for you,” said spokesman Steve Restivo. Walmart is offering price guarantees to shoppers who are inside a store between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m., on three hot-selling items, an Apple iPad2, an Emerson 32-inch LCD TV and an LG Blu-ray player.

In South Florida, even entire malls will open on Thanksgiving. Dolphin Mall in Sweetwater and Sawgrass Mills in Sunrise will be first, each opening at 9 p.m., and staying open until 10 p.m. and 9:30 p.m., respectively, on Black Friday.

Dadeland Mall and Miami International Mall will open at midnight Thursday.

“We’re very excited to open at midnight and give our shoppers a head start to the holiday season,” said Sara Valega, director of marketing for Miami International Mall, which will stay open until 11 p.m. on Friday.

Nationwide, 17 percent of consumers, or 41 million people are expected to shop on Thanksgiving, according to the latest consumer holiday tracking survey, released Tuesday by The International Council of Shopping Centers and Goldman Sachs.

With stores opening earlier and earlier, and some retailers launching pre-Thanksgiving sales, the retail industry has officially crossed the traditional Black Friday barrier — with no end in sight, said Kimberly Taylor, associate professor of marketing at Florida International University.

“It is becoming almost a whole season,” said Taylor, who is also the Macy’s chair of retailing at FIU. “Where is it going to end? Will it take away the whole Black Friday if it is the whole week or the whole season?”

Without question, the holiday shopping season is critical for retailers. It’s a period when they typically generate 20 percent to 40 percent of the full year’s revenue.

The Florida Retail Federation forecasts that Florida will see a 5.3 percent jump in holiday spending this year, to \$58 billion — marking the highest percentage growth predicted since the recession.

Driven in large part by tourists and snowbirds, Florida is expected to outpace the nation: holiday spending nationwide is forecast to rise 4.1 percent, according to the National Retail Federation. On average, consumers are expected to spend about \$750 each.

Yet while Black Friday (so named because it was traditionally when stores went into the black) is best known for holiday shopping, it is actually not the heaviest shopping day, said Rick McAllister, president and chief executive of the Florida Retail Federation.

In fact, Dec. 24 is the busiest shopping day of the year. And with Christmas Eve falling on a Monday this year, retailers are expecting a greater flurry of sales during the three-day weekend before Christmas, McAllister said.

Regardless, plenty of stores will open at the crack of dawn on Black Friday, hoping for a shopping

extravaganza.

JCPenney opens at 6 a.m. on Friday, “for its one big sale of the year.” Deals include \$5 kids’ pajama pants or tops, \$8 slow cookers, toaster ovens or coffee pots, \$12 men’s dress shirts and \$25 women’s boots.

Even Salvation Army stores in Miami-Dade are opening at 6 a.m., and closing at noon, with 50 percent off everything.

Aventura Mall will open at 6 a.m. on Friday. Bloomingdales will open at 7 a.m., Nordstrom at 8 a.m.

Leslie Wolfson loves to shop early on Black Friday.

“I’m the designers’ girl version of Black Friday,” said Wolfson, 49, chief executive of Connect the Dots, a business and marketing strategy firm in Aventura. She plans to hit Bloomingdales at 7 a.m., then head to Saks Fifth Avenue in Bal Harbour.

“I get the best deals ever,” said Wolfson, who lives in Aventura. “And those first three or four hours are kind of fun. It’s a free-for-all.”

Indeed, retailers are promising deals everywhere you look, all over South Florida.

Macy’s has a long list of specials, and a new Black Friday feature on Macy’s mobile app is geared to help customers shop for them.

Gap is offering up to 60 percent off storewide through Sunday. And from midnight until noon on Black Friday, customers can get such items as sweaters for \$19 at Gap and graphic tees for \$5 at GapKids and babyGap.

Banana Republic is giving customers 40 percent off their entire purchase on Black Friday.

At Aventura Mall, virtually every store has a sale. At 7 for all Mankind, for example, you can get 30 percent off your entire purchase. At Charles David, you can get 50 percent off the entire store until 1 p.m. on Friday, and then 40 percent after that. And at Desigual, you can get 70 percent off on Black Friday.

At Disney, you can get 20 percent off your entire purchase until 10 a.m. At Donald J. Pliner, you can get \$100 off all boots on Black Friday, and at the Body Shop you can get three items for \$30, a savings of up to \$78, the store says.

And don’t forget online shopping sites. Many, including Amazon.com and shopbop.com, are offering discounts leading up to “Cyber Monday,” the online equivalent of Black Friday.

Jumping on the Black Friday bandwagon, even travel companies and continuing education credit companies, like Cruise.com and CLECenter.com, are offering holiday deals.

But when it comes to shopping in stores, are all these Black Friday deals really the best of the season?

“Black Friday is very good prices, but not always the best,” the NPD Group’s Cohen said.

His advice is to follow the strategy he uses himself: If you like the deal, buy it. Most retailers, he said, will give you an adjustment if the price falls further.

“Don’t be afraid to buy a good deal and save the receipt,” Cohen said. “And if the price goes down, ask for a refund. You’ll get it.”

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