

# How to Win Black Friday

Sanity-saving tips for navigating the crowds, finding the best deals and, most of all, avoiding regret.



Holiday shopping season is upon us, and this year, it's going to be capital-B Big. The average American plans to spend, on average, \$1,128 this season, according to a recent survey by RetailMeNot. Broken down, that's \$141 per person for eight people total.

Translation: Expect your friends and neighbors to be out in full force on November 27, looking to scoop up the best deals. To help you keep your holiday spirit, despite the crowds and frenzied energy of the day, I've compiled a few of my favorite tips for Black Friday shopping. Try them out, and you'll not just survive the day, but you'll score the best bargains with the least amount of stress.

**Be the first to know:** By signing up for stores' email lists in advance, including Target, Macy's, Best Buy and Toys "R" Us, or by downloading their shopping apps, you can get a sneak peak at their best deals before the circulars hit your doorstep. That may give you just enough of a head start to do your research on the sale items, so you can sort out the good from the not-quite-as-good.

**Make a list:** Black Friday is not the day to browse or get ideas for the loved ones on your list. It's the day to just get in and get out. So don't even think of entering a store without a crystal-clear objective. In other words, knowing you want to get your son a new flat-screen TV isn't enough. On Black

Friday, you should know the brand and model number, too. That may mean going to the store before Thanksgiving to determine which one you'd like to buy. The more focused you are, the more successful you'll be in achieving your goals.

**Map the store:** There's nothing quite so stressful as walking into a large store and having to circle the place several times, through the crowds, to find what you're looking for, especially when what you're looking for is only being sold in limited quantities. Rather than wander aimlessly, go the store on any day before Black Friday, so you know at least in general where, say, the toy section is in relation to electronics.

**Bring snacks:** Think of shopping on Black Friday as an endurance sport. You've got to be smart and quick, as you'll also likely be on your feet for hours and hours. To avoid wasting time in line for sub-par soft pretzels or a slice of barely warmed frozen pizza, take along your own energy snacks. Bring some trail mix, a handful of almonds or a couple of granola bars to nibble on while you're standing in line.

**Choose the best line:** There's no bigger retail buzz kill than finding the perfect gift and then waiting in line for an hour just to pay for it. (Anyone who's ever been to Ikea surely knows this.) Two things to keep in mind, here, though: First, if you see a single monster line snaking to the back of the store but leading to multiple registers, rest easy. Those types of lines, known to queuing theorists as serpentine lines, where the first person is distributed to the first available cash register, look the longest but are the fastest. Second, if it's up to you to choose the best line, you may be better off heading to the left, according to "The Math Geek" by Raphael Rosen. "Approximately 90 percent of the population is right-handed, and so they tend to naturally head to the right," he writes. "So heading left is worth a try."

**Score a plum parking spot:** It's easy to waste your precious time and your equally precious patience looking for a good parking spot. Here's the key: Don't try following a shopper with bags to her car. If she cuts across the lot, even to just one row over, you'll have wasted your time. Also, don't keep circling in hopes that a spot right next to store's entrance will miraculously open at the exact moment you're passing by. Your best bet, according to the International Parking Institute: Commit to a row, any row, and then pull into the first available spot you see in it. Even if it's farther away than you'd hoped, you'll spend less time walking to the store than you would trolling for a closer spot. You'll also be able to start your shop in a good, rather than rageful, mood.

**Boost your buying confidence:** To help you get the best deals and save the most money, download RetailMeNot's app before you shop. It gives you instant access to any available coupon at thousands of stores. No clipping (or printing) required. Just flash the code on your phone to the cashier to instantly save bucks.

**Just buy gift cards:** Okay, so it's the not the cutest or most glamorous gift you could give, but it may in fact be the most thoughtful. According to the National Retail Federation, six in 10 people say they'd love to receive a gift card, making it the most frequently requested present for the past nine years running. The best part: Since you can order them online anytime, or pick them up when you're shopping for your Thanksgiving feast, you can spend Black Friday at home, relaxing with your loved ones.

**Procrastinate:** If you just don't want to brave the crowds, that doesn't mean you'll miss every last great deal. There's always Cyber Monday, after all, and if you have a computer, iPad or smartphone, you can shop that sale at home in your pajamas. No lines, no crowds, no stress. Have fun!

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