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Stores banking on Black Friday Merchants court consumers by opening before sunrise Friday, offering deep discounts

Carolyn Said, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Bill Bird planned to leave home at 3 o'clock Friday morning to get in line at Best Buy for a deal on one of the holiday season's hottest products: a flat-panel television.



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Bird is a long-time aficionado of Black Friday, the shopping marathon that takes place on the day after Thanksgiving, when retailers slash their prices and open before dawn to put eager bargain hunters into the Christmas-shopping mood.

This year, Bird scoured the new crop of Web sites that leaked major retailers' Black Friday advertising circulars and found a 20-inch LCD TV with a digital tuner at Best Buy for \$248 after a rebate. Technically, it's his Christmas gift to himself, destined to hang in the garage of his Sacramento home next to his beer refrigerator and his light-up Coors and Pabst Blue Ribbon signs. "The holidays just won't be right without football in the garage," he said.

Retailers hope that millions of folks like Bird will flock to stores Friday for the traditional kick-off to the holiday shopping season. While Black Friday isn't the biggest shopping day of the year -- the Saturday before Christmas holds that distinction -- it's an important barometer of the crucial sales season.

"It's a big deal," said Cynthia Cohen, president of Strategic Mindshare, a retail consulting firm in Miami. "It's a weekday that is nothing but a shopping holiday. Retailers count on Black Friday because it gives them an early read on customers' reactions to their product offerings. Even though there's a lot of promotional pricing, they have the freshest inventory, they sell the most at full retail or with good margins because the promotions are planned. By the Saturday before Christmas, their selections are (picked over), and they've really taken markdowns."

Almost a third of holiday shoppers launch their serious buying Friday, according to the Shopping in America Holiday 2005 survey of 3,780 shoppers nationwide. Women make up 61 percent of Black Friday shoppers, the survey found.

Top Autos

From
Autobahn Motors

ACURA

2003 TL
\$22,988

NISSAN

2004 Frontier
\$19,988

ACURA

2004 MDX
\$34,988

MERCEDES BENZ

2002 ML-Class
\$28,988

MERCEDES BENZ

2005 ML-Class
\$36,988

MERCEDES BENZ

2004 ML-Class
\$33,988

MERCEDES BENZ

2003 ML-Class
\$25,988

MERCEDES BENZ

2006 ML-Class
\$48,988

MERCEDES BENZ

2006 ML-Class
\$56,680

MERCEDES BENZ

The National Retail Federation expects up to 130 million consumers to go holiday shopping this weekend. Its surveys predict average consumer holiday spending of \$738.11, up 5.1 percent from last year. Like Bird, most consumers also plan a personal treat, spending an average \$86.62 on themselves, the studies found.

In October, the group forecast overall holiday sales of \$435.3 billion, up 5 percent from 2004, but late last week it revised that to \$439.53 billion, a 6 percent increase.

"Everybody uses Black Friday to put a stake in the ground on pricing," said Stephen Baker, vice president of industry analysis at the NPD Group, a market research firm in Port Washington, N.Y. "More and more retailers are using it to build momentum into the holiday season than they have in the past."

Black Friday got its name because traditionally it was the day that could tip a retailer into the black for the year. As shopping habits have changed, most stores say it's no longer a make-or-break day but still carries a powerful psychological impact.

"For 30 or 40 years, the day after Thanksgiving used to be the first day that anything in the store got marked down," said Dan Butler, vice president of merchandising and retail operations at the National Retail Federation in Washington, D.C. "Now we live in a day and age when things are promoted year-round. But people got ingrained in their minds to go shopping the day after Thanksgiving because that was the first day you'd get a mark-down. It became part of our institutional memory."

Stores pull out all the stops Friday to woo hard-core shoppers.

"Basically as a retailer you say, if you're shopping I want you at my store first before you run out of money," Butler said.

Target is offering wake-up calls Friday and Saturday from "celebrities" like Kermit the Frog and swimsuit models; it also offers "tuck-in" calls for Thursday and Friday nights. Sears will give free \$10 reward cards to the first 200 shoppers at each of its stores. Old Navy and Macy's have contests to win shopping sprees.

Most stores open as early as 5 a.m. or 6 a.m. with early-bird and doorbuster specials available only to the fortunate (and hardy) few who arrive in the first few hours. CompUSA opened at a minute before midnight last night for a "shop around the clock" promotion.

Black Friday "more than triples a normal business day," said Chris Cooley, a sales manager at Best Buy in San Francisco, which opens at 5 a.m. Friday with 4,000 Krispy Kreme donuts and Jamba Juices ready for customers in the parking lot. The chain this year hired 27,000 seasonal "blue shirt" employees for its 733 stores, 3 percent more than it hired last year.

Between soaring energy costs, Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq conflict and lingering economic doldrums, this has not been an upbeat year, but many experts said they don't think those factors will significantly depress sales.

Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, said she expects current events to be reflected in some shopping trends.

People this year are gravitating toward charitable tie-ins, gift items where a percentage of the sale will go to a worthwhile cause, she

2006 ML-Class
\$56,988

MERCEDES BENZ
2006 ML-Class
\$55,988

MERCEDES BENZ
2006 ML-Class
\$46,988

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2006 ML-Class
\$47,988

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said. The tighter economy means bargains matter more than ever. "People want something they perceive to be extra: extra points on their credit card, buy one and get one free, a bonus gift for themselves."

Another trend, she said, is gift cards -- "giving someone the gift of shopping." The NRF's Butler said the rising popularity of gift cards actually extends the holiday shopping season into the 10 days after Christmas.

Consumer electronics, like the new Xbox 360, the iPod nano, laptops and plasma TVs are expected to be the hottest-selling category. "Electronics are mostly immune from economic conditions," Baker said. "If someone is willing to spend \$3,000 on a TV, 20 cents (a gallon) more in gas prices doesn't influence them much."

The Internet is increasingly a force in holiday sales, for price comparisons as much as actual shopping. This Monday is being dubbed "Cyber Monday," the day when people return to work and surf the Web for bargains. But in reality, according to Bill Tancer, general manager of global research at Hitwise, an Internet market research firm, the biggest surge in traffic to online shopping sites comes on Thanksgiving Day.

The other big online development this year is the surge of Black Friday Web sites like www.bfads.net, www.blackfriday.gottadeal.com and www.fatwallet.com. These sites posted leaked information about Black Friday specials, giving bargain hunters a sneak peek at store discounts. While some retailers protested, experts said the sites would drive more traffic to stores Friday.

A growing minority of people have decided to opt out of the holiday shopping frenzy.

In 1993, Kalle Lasn, founder and editor-in-chief of AdBusters magazine in Vancouver, proposed the concept of a "Buy Nothing Day" on the day after Thanksgiving as a response to rampant consumerism.

The movement has grown to 65 countries and tens of thousands of people. In San Francisco it often draws pranksters to Union Square for performance pieces like cutting up credit cards in front of stores or cavorting through malls wearing masks.

"When we started, we were a bit of a joke," Lasn said. "Now more and more people are realizing that over-consumption is the mother of our environmental problems. A lot of people who take the personal plunge and go on a consumer fast this Friday have a strange kind of experience; they find it is really hard to suppress the impulse to buy, but when they make it through the day they feel proud and realize that buying can be like an addiction."

Martha Bader of Oakland plans to commemorate Buy Nothing Day Friday.

"It's part of an attitude adjustment to remember the holidays as shared celebrations, not as endless parties and spiraling debt," she wrote in an e-mail. "I'm simplifying this year and plan to make many cards and gifts. I feel better just thinking about it and that alone should translate into much more fun with friends and family."

Store hours

Many stores Friday are opening earlier and closing later to accommodate shoppers. Here's a sampling of store hours for some major retailers:

- Wal-Mart -- 5 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- Target -- 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- Kmart -- 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- Macy's -- 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.
- Nordstrom -- 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.
- Sears -- 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.
- Gap -- 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.
- Toys R Us -- 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.
- Best Buy -- 5 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- Mervyn's -- 5 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- Ross Stores -- 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.

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<p>Top Marketing Minds Share Insight into Breaking Consumer Trends & what they mean for brands InfluxInsights.com</p>
<p>Where Can You Volunteer? TimeBank can help you inspire many people locally or around the world! www.timebank.org.uk</p>



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