

My View From the Line

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After doing much of the cooking for my family's epic Thanksgiving dinner, I wrestled with the prospect of going out into the cold November night to meet up with 600 of my closest electronics buying friends. My curiosity, however, got the best of me and I ventured out after my family had long gone to sleep. As we all know, Black Friday starts earlier and earlier each year and this Thanksgiving night, around 11pm still smelling of pumpkin pie, I set out to hunt for bargains. I visited my local Best Buy and Walmart—strategically mapped out near my home to avoid the inevitable traffic jams.

My first stop was Best Buy. Not surprisingly, the line prior to opening was about 700 strong and stretched around the back of the store and into an adjoining plaza's parking lot. While my research prior to coming out told me the usual suspects (televisions, laptops, and Blu-ray players) would be in high demand, I heard a lot of discussion in the line about headphones, digital cameras, and video games. With all the emphasis placed on unbelievable Doorbusters in the lead up to Black Friday, two things struck me as I entered the store. First, accessories like camera cases, video cables, and mounts were all deeply discounted and being snatched up by many (I found iPad cases, 6ft HDMI cables, and smartphone cases all for around \$10). Second, the most scintillating television sales weren't necessarily for \$199 42 inch displays. I saw a number of premium brand LED sets 50 inches and above for under \$1,400—almost a third off the regular price. I also saw a lot of interest in 3D, particularly a set complete with four pairs of glasses, HDMI cable, and a 3D Blu-ray player for just under \$700 at Walmart. Undoubtedly, one of the stories this holiday season will be kickstarting display sales and increasing the size and feature set of primary and secondary sets in the home.

Amid all of this hoopla, audio seemed like the girl at the prom with no date. At the stores I visited, huge boxes of 50 inch TVs crammed into shopping carts were a

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common sight, but I observed few HTIBs and soundbars being shuffled around. Despite great prices (I saw a soundbar discounted \$100 from its original price) I didn't see much interest in audio products beyond headphones (an always popular gift for the holidays). Perhaps the Black Friday night extravaganza isn't as conducive to the audio shopping experience as it is for video. This Black Friday night, video products—TVs, video games, and cameras were in highest demand.

Both the blessing and curse of Black Friday is that sales associates essentially become (much needed) crowd control inside the store. While most products are plentiful and accessible to shoppers, it is difficult to wrangle one of these busy folks to ask questions about the devices themselves. This makes research going in to Black Friday that much more important, as stores take on more of a self-serve format to accommodate the rush of shoppers. I think most consumers on this night would agree, however, the temporary switch is worth being able to capitalize on the great deals.

In talking with my family and friends the morning after, one thing is apparent, Black Friday is the consumer electronics shopping holiday. While other products add flavor to the offers and circulars, shoppers camp out, stand in line, and queue up for deals on technology. Getting shoppers in the door this night has been no problem, but for retailers the key will be turning this traffic into profits. As we marvel at the great deals available over this weekend and into Cyber Monday, the benefit to the bottom line will be the true measure of just how black this Friday was.

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