

# Holiday shopping battle starts to get pitched

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From free shipping from Wal-Mart to Sears stores open on Thanksgiving for the first time, the battle for holiday shoppers' dollars has begun in earnest.

The early competition to break through shoppers' caution about spending promises savings for those willing to buy amid an economy that's still worrying many. It also promises convenience. Retailers are offering deals anytime, anywhere their customers want, through websites, smart phones and Facebook.

Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving that typically kicks off holiday shopping, is not only being marketed as "Black Friday week," but for a growing number of stores, "Black Friday month."

As for Thanksgiving, some retailers like Sears and Gap's Old Navy hope shoppers will head to stores after they finish their turkey feasts. On the Web, Kohl's Corp. and Target Corp. are among many merchants dramatically stepping up deals that day, counting on that holiday to be one of the busiest days of the year online.

"Everything is faster and sooner," said Dan Grandpre, editor-in-chief of Dealnews.com, which opened an office in Dublin, Ireland, a few months ago to monitor the frenetic pace of offers, particularly during the holidays. Dealnews is based in Huntsville, Ala.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. is clearly going for the jugular in the holiday retailing fight. It announced Thursday that it will offer free shipping on nearly 60,000 online items — with no minimum purchase requirement. The offer, which includes most electronics, jewelry and toys, will run through Dec. 20. Return shipping is also free, or items can be returned to a local store.

Wal-Mart's free offer comes on top of similarly aggressive free shipping programs from Target and J.C. Penney. Wal-Mart's deal adds to the discounter's Site to Store program, which lets customers buy an item online and have it shipped free to their local Walmart store for pickup.

Walmart.com is even testing a service at nearly 800 stores that lets customers see inventory and purchase products right from home. The online orders are usually ready to be picked up at a store within four hours.

That concept isn't new, but many stores are joining Walmart in trying to speed up the turnaround time, says Noam Paransky, retail strategist at Kurt Salmon Associates.

"Retailers are trying to be in front of customers 24/7," Paransky said. With the wider adoption of smart phones, "it's exploding this year."

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Facebook.com recently launched its Deals program, teaming up with a number of stores including Penney and Gap Inc. The offering allows shoppers to "check in" using smart phones to these shops and reap rewards or discounts.

The intense marketing is happening in a season in which shoppers are expected to spend only a little more than last year. Unemployment is still stuck close to 10 percent, and consumer confidence has been anemic for months and months.

The National Retail Federation expects a 2.3 percent increase in spending to \$447.1 billion. That would fall short of the 10-year historic average of 2.5 percent, according to the retail trade group.

Online, the prospects are brighter. Online research firm comScore Inc. expects anywhere from 7 to 9 percent growth compared with a year ago, when business was up 4 percent over the previous year, according to its calculations. About 10 percent of holiday sales are made online, according to Forrester analyst Sucharita Mulpuru.

"You clearly have a consumer who is restrained. So you have this drive to encourage consumers to spend," Kevin Mansell, Kohl's president and CEO, said in an interview with The Associated Press. But a bigger factor is "retailers have to move with the consumer, and the consumer wants ultimately flexibility of buying. You have to move with her."

Against this background, the holiday deals have come in rapid-fire succession. In the past 24 hours, Best Buy Co. announced it's discounting a number of its electronics items this Friday and Saturday. For example, it has a 40-inch LCD HDTV for \$399.99.

Retailer Kmart said it's letting customers who buy items online pick up purchases on the same day at more than 600 locations. The retailer, owned by Sears Holdings Corp., also announced customers can now buy items through the Kmart2go mobile web site or smart phone applications and select in-store pickup. The apps also can be used in-store for product information.

But many are also not waiting to give shoppers a sneak preview of what type of come-ons they'll find the day after Thanksgiving:

— Target will offer discounts both online and in stores. It's offering a Thanksgiving Day sale online with deals including discounts of up to 50 percent off on electronics such as cameras, TVs, a Blu-ray player and video game console. In stores, Target will have 25 early morning Black Friday bargains, 11 more than last year.

— Staples is offering deals from 6 a.m. to noon including a \$499.98 HP Laptop with an Intel Celeron 900 Processor marked down to \$299.98.

— The Disney Store plans to offer 20 percent off most items until 10 a.m. It also plans to open 110 locations at midnight.

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