



**BLACK  
FRIDAY  
GUIDE**

# Comfortable Shopping

Black Friday can be exciting, but it can also feel overwhelming.

Packed parking lots, loud music, bright displays and long checkout lines can quickly turn a shopping trip into sensory overload, especially for neurodivergent shoppers.

The good news is a little planning can make the day far more manageable. Whether you're shopping for gifts, grabbing seasonal deals or simply tagging along with family, there are ways to reduce stress and make the experience more comfortable.

## START WITH A FLEXIBLE PLAN

One of the hardest parts of Black Friday is unpredictability. Stores are crowded, items sell out quickly and schedules can change without warning. Creating a loose plan before heading out can help reduce anxiety and decision fatigue.

Choose one or two stores instead of trying to tackle an entire shopping district. Make a short priority list of items you truly want, then decide in advance what can wait or be skipped altogether.

It helps to check store maps online, note restroom locations and identify quiet spaces nearby where you can take a break if needed. Having an exit plan can make crowded situations feel less overwhelming because you know you can leave at any time.



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## USE TOOLS THAT REDUCE SENSORY STRESS

Sensory overload is common during holiday shopping. Bright lights, overlapping conversations and nonstop announcements can become draining quickly.

Noise-canceling headphones or earplugs can help soften background sounds while still allowing you to stay aware of your surroundings. Sunglasses, hats or comfortable layered

clothing may also help reduce sensory discomfort.

Some shoppers find it helpful to visit stores during sensory-friendly shopping hours. In recent years, more retailers have introduced quieter shopping periods with dimmed lights and reduced music during the holiday season. Calling ahead or checking store websites can help you find calmer times to shop.

Taking short breaks is important, too. Stepping outside

for fresh air, sitting in the car for a few minutes or grabbing a quiet drink can help reset your energy before continuing.

## REMEMBER THAT ONLINE SHOPPING COUNTS

Black Friday does not have to mean standing in line at 5 a.m. Online shopping has become one of the best alternatives for people who want the deals without the crowds.

Many retailers now offer the same promotions online, often

starting days before Black Friday itself. Shopping from home allows you to compare prices, take breaks and avoid sensory overload altogether.

Most importantly, give yourself permission to shop differently. There is no right way to experience Black Friday. Whether you spend the day browsing stores, shopping online from the couch or skipping the sales entirely, the goal is to make the season feel enjoyable, not overwhelming.

# Beyond Black Friday

Black Friday may still be the headline consumer event of Thanksgiving weekend, but it's no longer the only shopping day that matters.

Over the past two decades, retailers, nonprofits and small businesses have expanded the holiday shopping season into a full calendar of themed events that stretch from Thanksgiving Day into the following week.

For shoppers, that means more ways to save, support local businesses and even give back to the community.

## SMALL BUSINESS SATURDAY KEEPS IT LOCAL

First launched in 2010, Small Business Saturday encourages shoppers to spend money at locally owned stores, restaurants and service providers. The event takes place the Saturday after Thanksgiving and has become a major boost for independent businesses during the holiday season.

Unlike Black Friday's focus on massive crowds and door-buster deals, Small Business Saturday often feels more relaxed and community centered. Local bookstores, boutiques, coffee shops and gift stores frequently offer special promotions, holiday treats or neighborhood events to attract



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customers.

For many shoppers, it's a chance to find more personal gifts while supporting local jobs and keeping money within the community.

## CYBER MONDAY BRINGS THE DEALS ONLINE

Cyber Monday arrives the Monday after Thanksgiving and focuses almost entirely on on-

line shopping. Originally created to encourage internet sales, the event has grown into one of the biggest e-commerce days of the year.

Retailers now offer discounts on everything from electronics and clothing to travel deals and home goods. Many shoppers prefer Cyber

Monday because it allows them to skip crowded stores

and compare prices from home.

In recent years, the line between Black Friday and Cyber Monday has started to blur. Many retailers launch online sales before Thanksgiving and continue them through the following week. Some companies even offer "Cyber Week" promotions that extend well beyond Monday.

## GIVING TUESDAY ADDS A DIFFERENT FOCUS

After days centered on shopping and sales, Giving Tuesday shifts attention toward charitable giving and community support. Held the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, the global campaign encourages people to donate to nonprofits, volunteer locally or support causes they care about.

Many charities use Giving Tuesday to launch fundraising drives or matching donation campaigns during the holiday season. Schools, food banks, animal shelters and community organizations often participate.

The event has grown rapidly through social media and on-line fundraising, turning the post-Thanksgiving calendar into something bigger than retail alone.

## NEW SHOPPING EVENTS CONTINUE TO GROW

Retailers continue to create new holiday-themed promotions throughout the season. "Black Friday Week," "Travel Tuesday" and app-exclusive shopping events have become increasingly common as stores compete for attention earlier each year.

For shoppers, the expanded calendar offers more flexibility. Instead of feeling pressured to buy everything in one day, consumers can spread out purchases, compare deals and choose events that fit their schedules and priorities.

The result is a holiday shopping season that now lasts far longer than a single Friday.

# Psychology of Black Friday

Every holiday shopping season brings the same familiar messages: “Limited time only.” “While supplies last.” “Doorbusters start at 5 a.m.”

For many shoppers, those phrases create a sense of urgency that can feel hard to ignore. Retailers understand that buying decisions are often emotional, especially during high-energy shopping events like Black Friday. The result is a retail environment designed to encourage quick decisions and impulse purchases.

Understanding how those tactics work can help shoppers make more thoughtful choices and avoid overspending during the holiday season.

## WHY URGENCY WORKS SO WELL

One of the strongest psychological triggers in shopping is scarcity. When people believe an item may disappear soon, it often feels more valuable.

Countdown clocks on websites, low-stock alerts and today-only promotions all tap into the fear of missing out. Even shoppers who were not originally planning to buy something may suddenly feel pressure to act quickly before the opportunity disappears.

Doorbuster sales create a similar effect. Limited quanti-



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ties encourage competition and excitement, especially when shoppers see long lines or crowded stores. Psychologists sometimes refer to this as social proof. People assume something must be valuable if everyone else wants it.

Retailers also use timed promotions to reduce the amount of time shoppers spend think-

ing about a purchase. Fast decisions are more likely to be emotional rather than practical.

## EMOTIONAL SPENDING HAPPENS QUICKLY

Holiday shopping often carries emotional weight beyond the products themselves. People may feel pressure to create

perfect celebrations, find meaningful gifts or take advantage of so-called once-a-year savings.

Stress, excitement and fatigue can affect spending habits. After hours of shopping or scrolling online deals, decision-making becomes harder and impulse purchases become easier. Some shoppers

experience what experts call reward spending. Finding a great deal creates a small emotional boost, which can encourage additional purchases even when they are not necessary.

That does not mean every impulse buy is bad. But recognizing emotional triggers can help shoppers pause before overspending.

## HOW TO SHOP MORE INTENTIONALLY

A few simple habits can make a big difference during major sales events.

Creating a shopping list ahead of time helps shoppers focus on items they actually need rather than reacting to every promotion. Setting a budget before browsing online or entering a store can also reduce impulse purchases.

It helps to ask a few quick questions before buying:

- Would I still want this item if it were not on sale?
- Was I already planning to buy it?
- Am I shopping because I need something or because I feel pressure to act quickly?

Taking a short break before completing large purchases can help separate excitement from genuine need.

Black Friday deals can absolutely offer real savings. But the smartest shoppers often are not the fastest shoppers. They are the ones who understand how marketing works and make decisions that fit their budgets, priorities and holiday goals.

# The Crews Behind Shopping Season

Behind every stocked shelf, delivered package and customer service chat is a workforce that often operates long before sunrise and long after stores close.

The modern holiday shopping season depends heavily on overnight workers and around-the-clock logistics teams. Warehouse employees, delivery drivers, retail associates and customer service staff help keep the massive retail machine moving during one of the busiest shopping weekends of the year.

## WAREHOUSES NEVER REALLY SLEEP

Online shopping has transformed Black Friday from a one-day retail event into a non-stop fulfillment operation. Distribution centers across the country process millions of orders in the days surrounding Thanksgiving, often running 24 hours a day.

Warehouse employees sort products, pack orders and prepare shipments at an intense pace as retailers race to meet delivery deadlines. Seasonal hiring ramps up significantly during the fall, with many companies bringing on temporary workers to handle increased demand.

For workers, the holiday season can mean overnight shifts,



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mandatory overtime and physically demanding schedules. At the same time, the temporary jobs created during the shopping season can provide extra income for students, retirees and people looking for seasonal work.

## DELIVERY DRIVERS KEEP THE PACE MOVING

The surge in online shopping has placed enormous pressure on delivery networks. Drivers for shipping companies, retailers and food delivery services often face packed schedules during Thanksgiving weekend and the weeks that

follow.

Packages move quickly from warehouses to trucks to front porches, sometimes within hours of an online purchase. Many shoppers now expect fast shipping as the norm, especially during major sales events.

That convenience depends on thousands of drivers navigating long routes, traffic, winter weather and tight delivery windows throughout the holiday season.

For some workers, holiday demand can increase earnings through overtime hours or bonus opportunities. But it can create long workdays and

heightened stress during an already busy time of year.

## ON THE FRONT LINES

Inside stores, retail employees handle crowded aisles, restock shelves and assist customers throughout extended holiday hours. Customer service representatives answer questions online, process returns and troubleshoot shipping issues as order volumes climb.

Holiday shoppers may not always see the behind-the-scenes coordination required to keep stores operating smoothly. A single sale often

depends on teams working across inventory systems, shipping centers, customer support and storefront operations.

As shopping habits continue to evolve, the workers powering Black Friday have become just as essential as the sales themselves.

For shoppers, the holiday rush can also serve as a reminder that convenience is supported by real people working long hours to make the season run smoothly. Patience, kindness and realistic expectations can go a long way during one of retail's busiest weekends of the year.



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# Shopping by Generation

Holiday shopping may be a shared tradition, but the way Americans shop can look very different from one generation to the next.

From social media deals and mobile apps to newspaper ads and in-store browsing, each age group brings its own habits, priorities and spending style to the holiday season. Retailers pay close attention to those differences, especially during Black Friday and the weeks leading up to Christmas.

## GEN Z SHOPS SOCIAL FIRST

For Gen Z shoppers, social media plays a major role in holiday buying decisions. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube often shape what products trend during the season, especially in categories like beauty, fashion, tech and home decor.

Many younger shoppers are comfort-

able making purchases directly through apps or influencer recommendations. Flash sales, limited-edition products and brand collaborations tend to create excitement and urgency.

Gen Z shoppers tend to value personalization and convenience. Mobile shopping, buy-now-pay-later services and same-day delivery are especially popular with younger consumers.

At the same time, many Gen Z shoppers are highly price conscious. With rising living costs and student debt concerns, younger consumers often spend more time comparing prices and searching for deals before buying.

## MILLENNIALS BALANCE BUDGET AND CONVENIENCE

Millennials now make up a large portion of holiday shoppers, many while balancing careers, children and busy schedules. Convenience is often a top priority.

Online shopping remains especially popular among Millennials, who helped drive the shift toward Cyber Monday

and app-based shopping. Many use a mix of online research and in-store pickup to save time during the holiday rush.

This generation tends to place value on experiences and practical purchases. Gift cards, travel, subscriptions and home-related items often rank high during the holiday season.

Millennials are also more likely to research product reviews before making purchases. Rather than rushing into impulse buys, many spend time comparing brands, reading customer feedback and hunting for online discounts.

## GEN X FOCUSES ON VALUE AND EFFICIENCY

Gen X shoppers are often described as practical and efficient during the holidays. Many are shopping not only for children, but sometimes for aging parents as well, making budgeting and planning especially important.

This generation tends to use both digital and traditional shopping methods comfortably. They may browse deals on-

line while still appreciating in-store shopping and printed sale ads.

Loyalty programs, rewards points and reliable customer service often matter more to Gen X consumers than flashy trends or viral products.

## BOOMERS STILL VALUE THE IN-STORE EXPERIENCE

While online shopping has grown across all age groups, many Baby Boomers still enjoy the traditional experience of holiday shopping in stores.

Boomers often value customer service, product quality and familiar brands. Many prefer seeing products in person before purchasing, especially for major gifts or household items.

That said, older shoppers have increasingly embraced online shopping in recent years, particularly for convenience and home delivery.

Despite their differences, all generations share one thing during the holiday season: the search for meaningful gifts, good deals and traditions that make the season feel special.

# From Print Ads to Online Shopping

For many Americans, Black Friday once meant waking up before dawn, circling deals in newspaper inserts and standing in long lines outside stores waiting for midnight or early morning openings.

The holiday shopping tradition felt like a major event. Families planned routes between stores, friends compared sale ads and shoppers bundled up in winter coats hoping to score a limited-time deal before shelves emptied.

Today, much of that experience has shifted online. Black Friday still draws crowds, but the culture surrounding the shopping holiday has changed dramatically in the era of smartphones, apps and next-day delivery.

## WHEN NEWSPAPER CIRCULARS RULED BLACK FRIDAY

Before online retail transformed shopping habits, newspaper circulars were one of the biggest parts of the Black Friday experience.

Thanksgiving Day papers often arrived stuffed with thick packets of store ads featuring electronics, toys, appliances and clothing discounts. Many shoppers spent hours flipping through pages, highlighting deals and mapping out shop-



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ping plans for the next morning.

Retailers competed fiercely for attention with bold headlines, giant price tags and highly anticipated “doorbuster” items. Some shoppers even treated the annual ads like a holiday tradition of their own.

For local newspapers, Black Friday advertising sections became some of the largest and most profitable editions of the year.

## MIDNIGHT OPENINGS BECAME A SPECTACLE

As competition between retailers intensified during the 2000s, stores began opening earlier and earlier. Midnight openings eventually became

one of the defining images of Black Friday.

Crowds lined up outside malls and big-box retailers late on Thanksgiving evening, sometimes camping for hours to secure limited products. News coverage frequently showed packed parking lots, rushing shoppers and long checkout lines.

For some families, the late-night shopping trips became part of the holiday tradition. Groups of friends grabbed coffee, planned shopping routes and turned bargain hunting into a social event.

But the trend also drew criticism. Retail workers faced overnight shifts during Thanksgiving, and many shoppers

questioned whether stores opening on the holiday itself had gone too far. Every year, stories of violence and injuries grabbed headlines as shoppers trampled each other to get into stores as they opened or fought over limited deals.

## ONLINE SHOPPING CHANGED EVERYTHING

The rise of e-commerce reshaped Black Friday more than any other factor. As online retailers expanded, shoppers gained the ability to compare prices, browse inventory and place orders without leaving home.

Cyber Monday helped accelerate that shift, but eventually the distinction between online

and in-store sales started to disappear. Retailers began launching deals days or even weeks before Thanksgiving, stretching Black Friday into an entire season.

Today, many shoppers still enjoy visiting stores in person, especially for the excitement and tradition. But others prefer the convenience of shopping from the couch with a phone in hand.

The modern version of Black Friday may look different from the packed mall scenes of decades past, but the excitement of finding a good deal remains largely the same. The tools have changed. The tradition of holiday bargain hunting has not.

# Understanding Return Policies

For many retailers, the holiday shopping season does not end when the sales are over. In fact, one of the busiest shopping periods of the year begins immediately afterward: returns season.

From unwanted gifts and incorrect sizes to duplicate purchases and online ordering mistakes, millions of items make their way back to stores every January. But return policies are not always as simple as shoppers expect, especially during major holiday sales.

Knowing the rules before buying can help shoppers avoid surprises later.

## HOLIDAY RETURN WINDOWS ARE OFTEN DIFFERENT

Many retailers extend their return deadlines during the holiday season. An item purchased in November, for example, may still be eligible for return in January even if the standard return window is only 30 days.

That flexibility helps shoppers buying gifts well before Christmas. However, policies vary widely between stores and online retailers.

Some companies offer extended holiday returns only on certain items, while electron-



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ics, beauty products or clearance merchandise may still follow stricter timelines. In some cases, holiday purchases made during Black Friday promotions may have different conditions entirely.

Checking the return deadline before purchasing can save frustration after the holidays.

## FINAL SALE POLICIES

One of the most important

labels shoppers should watch for during Black Friday and clearance events is “final sale.”

Final-sale items typically cannot be returned or exchanged unless the product is damaged or defective. Clothing, seasonal decor, personalized gifts and heavily discounted merchandise are especially likely to fall into that category during holiday promotions.

Restocking fees can catch

shoppers off guard. Some retailers charge fees for returning electronics, large appliances or opened items, particularly when products require repackaging or inspection before resale.

Online shoppers should pay attention to return shipping costs. While many retailers now advertise free returns, others deduct shipping fees from refunds or require customers to pay for return labels.

## DIGITAL RECEIPTS ARE CHANGING THE PROCESS

Paper receipts are no longer the only proof of purchase. Many stores now offer digital receipts through email, store apps or loyalty accounts, making returns easier to track during the busy holiday season.

For shoppers, digital receipts can be especially helpful when buying gifts across multiple stores. They reduce the risk of losing paperwork and may simplify exchanges after the holidays.

Gift receipts have become more common, allowing recipients to exchange items without seeing the original purchase price.

Still, experts recommend keeping order confirmations and shipping emails until return windows fully expire, especially for online purchases.

## A LITTLE RESEARCH CAN PREVENT STRESS

Holiday shopping moves quickly, and many consumers focus heavily on finding the best deal. But return policies matter just as much as sale prices.

Before buying, shoppers can save time and money by asking a few simple questions: How long is the return window? Is the item final sale? Are there restocking or shipping fees? Can online purchases be returned in stores?

A good deal feels even better when shoppers know exactly what happens if plans change after the holidays.