

MarketWatch

Scoring great Black Friday deals is getting harder. These 6 tips can help you shop smarter this weekend.

In an informal poll, most MarketWatch readers said they consider a good Black Friday discount to be at least 30% off

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Black Friday was once associated with long lines in the cold and deal-hungry shoppers fighting over TVs. In the days before online shopping became ubiquitous, stores welcomed the mayhem by opening early for those who willingly woke up before dawn to push through crowds and snag the best door-buster deals.

As consumers rely on online retail more than ever, Black Friday has changed. As a shopping event, the day itself is sleepier, and the deals are available much longer. Retailers offer discounts not just on the Friday after Thanksgiving, but for days and sometimes even weeks before. Amazon's ↓ **AMZN -0.17%** Black Friday sale, for instance, started Nov. 20 and runs through Dec. 1. Best Buy ↓ **BBY -1.35%** is offering door-busters every single Friday of the holiday season.

Consumers are eager for [value-centric offers](#). They're feeling pressured by [persistent inflation](#) and [rising household debt](#). The cooling labor market is adding to shoppers' anxieties about their financial strength and driving down [consumer sentiment](#).

But shoppers on the lookout for deep discounts this holiday shopping season may be disappointed. Deals aren't as enticing as they once were. Black Friday discounts are expected to average around 25% this year, according to Marshal Cohen, chief retail adviser at the market-research firm Circana.

These projected discounts are similar to last year's sales, but an average of 25% off is "a lot less potent" than Black Friday markdowns in prior years, Cohen said. It's also below what the majority of MarketWatch readers in an informal poll said they consider a "good" Black Friday deal. About 70% [polled](#) on X said a worthwhile discount should be more than 30%.

"COVID took away the door-buster deal to some degree," Cohen said. In years past, big-box retailers would slash prices on one or two sought-after items to get shoppers in the door. Now deals may be more spread throughout a store's inventory. That's a sign of retailers becoming more targeted and precise in their offers.

Consumers are expected to spend a record \$11.8 billion online this Black Friday, according to [data](#) from Adobe **↑ ADBE +0.56%**, which would be an 8.3% increase in spending from last year's holiday.

“Shoppers are stressed, and they are going to do whatever it takes to make sure they are stretching their dollars as far as possible,” said Wendy Bergh, chief marketing officer at cash-back and shopping-rewards company Rakuten **↓ RKUNY -1.14%**. “People want to feel confident that they’ve squeezed every ounce of value out of every purchase, and they’re willing to put in the effort to make that happen.”

Read more: [Americans are nerve-wracked about the economy as Black Friday and the holiday shopping season kick off. Consumer confidence slumps again.](#)

If you plan on hunting for deals, here are six tips to help you score a good discount as the best offers have become harder to find.

Aim for items that are at least 40% off

The minimum threshold to a deal worthwhile in most consumers' eyes is 25% off or more, according to shopping expert Trae Bodge. On Black Friday, Bodge said shoppers should aim for 40% or higher to achieve maximum savings — but data suggests it will be difficult to find products marked down by that much.

Adobe expects shoppers to find the biggest online discounts this year on TVs (an average of 23% off), toys (27% off) and appliances (18%).

Read more: [How to tariff-proof your holiday shopping list](#)

It's also important to note that inflation has watered down deals even further — particularly for toys, which now face effective tariff rates of around 20% [according to](#) the Mastercard **↓ MA -0.60%** Economic Institute.

“You may find some better deals there, but are they really better deals compared to last year?” Cohen said. “The prices are higher.”

Don't use AI to find deals. Use it for this instead.

Artificial intelligence has become a major part of the online-shopping experience, with e-commerce traffic from large-language models skyrocketing 518% over the past year, according to Adobe.

Searching for price comparisons on an AI chatbot like ChatGPT or Gemini might not yield the most accurate results, as “it’s very hard for AI to be so up to the minute on what’s the biggest, hottest, latest deal,” Bodge said.

Read more: [Google is crushing it. Why that’s worrying investors in Nvidia and other AI stocks.](#)

However, Bodge did recommend using AI to research the gifts you plan on purchasing. “If you’re not sure what to buy your 10-year-old nephew who loves animals, give some prompts to an AI chat and get some inspiration,” she said.

Even with diluted deals, a trip to the mall can still be worth it

Unmanageable crowds at malls and big-box stores may only live on as tales of Black Friday lore, but retailers still tend to put out heavy discounts on in-store items where they have excess inventory to drive foot traffic.

“That’s where you’re going to get that flat screen TV for 80% off,” Bodge said. “It’s going to be harder to get that online. It may not even be available online.”

Read more: [Fears about the ‘sketchy’ economy have Americans turning to secondhand stores for Christmas shopping](#)

Being in the store also lets you see and touch a product to ensure it's up to par and meets your needs, helping you avoid a trip to the post office to return an unwanted online order. And keep in mind that retailers' return policies aren't as [generous as they once were](#), with many stores now charging a fee and shortening the amount of time shoppers have to send items back.

"If you're buying a gift for someone, sometimes it's better to know what you're getting and seeing it and understanding what it is," Cohen said. "Because how many times have we bought something online and it just didn't kind of come in the way we thought it would?"

BOGO deals are good for Christmas gifts, not for shopping for yourself

Buy-one-get-one free (or at a discount) offers can be tempting, and they're a great way to score significant savings if you're buying the same gift for a group of co-workers or several people in your family or friend group. But don't use the existence of such deals to justify an unnecessary purchase.

Read more: [Doing your holiday shopping with a credit card? Use these 6 tips to preserve your credit score – and your sanity.](#)

"You want to really stop and ask yourself, 'Do I need multiples of these?'" Bodge said.

Remember that you can get Black Friday deals on experiences, not just things

If you've been putting off booking upcoming travel, Black Friday is a good day to schedule your accommodations.

Large hotel groups like [Hyatt](#) ↓ **H -0.97%**, [Marriott](#) ↓ **MAR -0.26%** and [Hilton](#) ↓ **HLT -0.68%** are all offering discounted rates on stays and you can save hundreds to thousands of dollars on tours abroad with Black Friday deals at [EF Adventures](#) and [CIE Tours](#). [Delta Air Lines](#) ↓ **DAL -0.61%** and [JetBlue](#) ↓ **JBLU -3.28%** [Vacations](#) are also offering deals for flights and vacation packages, and cruise lines like [Royal Caribbean](#) ↓ **RCL -0.85%** and [Norwegian](#) ↓ **NCLH -0.76%** are slashing prices significantly.

When shopping for travel on Black Friday, experts recommend not just comparing prices but looking at the total value of available deals.

“Some deals include added extras, reduced fees or more flexible cancellation policies that make the overall experience a better buy,” said Lori McNaught, vice president of revenue management at Olympia Hospitality. “In a competitive holiday season, paying attention to both rate and benefits is the key to truly maximizing value.”

Use price comparison tools, cash-back sites and gift card discounts when shopping online

There are tools available to help shave off some of the cost of an online shopping haul in real time. Here are a few that experts recommend:

- Price-comparison tools like [CamelCamelCamel](#), [Yahoo Shopping](#) and [Google](#) ↓ **GOOG -1.13%** [Shopping](#)
- Cash-back and coupon sites like [Rakuten](#) and [Honey](#)
- Discounted gift card sellers like [Gift Card Granny](#)

Black Friday falls on Nov. 28.

Andrew Keshner contributed.

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