

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Navigating the Web of Boxing Day bargains

If you're not shopping online, use the Internet to research prices before fighting the crowds at the mall

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Danier Leather on Robson Street in Vancouver was one of the few stores with Boxing Day signs up on Thursday. Experts suggest shopping alone to achieve your goals.

Photograph by: Jenelle Schneider, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

Scoring Boxing Day deals used to mean heading out early while still feeling the after-effects of Christmas revelry, or even pitching a tent on pavement the night before.

But why camp out when you can log on? Recent polls show that more Canadians are both shopping online and using the Internet to price-check before hitting the malls.

So trade the tent and sleeping bag for slippers and a hot chocolate, and let the Web lead you to the dandy deals. Just arm yourself with information so you can determine whether the savings match the hype, one shopping expert recommends.

"People can be empowered now with all the research available in advance," said Debbie Frye, general manager of Flyerland.ca, which posts flyers and coupons by city for most of Canada's top retailers. "If you've already done the research, you'll already have an idea of what a best deal is. You're going to see so many signs and you could really get enticed and not get a good deal if you don't plan."

Most retailers post their Boxing Day flyers on the Internet tonight, which helps people compare prices before heading out, Frye said.

And many stores also are launching their online Boxing Day sales tonight. So if you plan on shopping online and are eyeing one of the early bird blockbuster deals, make sure you sign up for an account before the sale starts so you don't get out-clicked by rival buyers. Signing up for e-mail alerts is also a good plan, Frye said.

"Set up a separate e-mail if you need to, but certainly sign up to be alerted by stores that are important to your plan," she said.

Three-quarters of Canadians do online research before heading out to stores, according to a recent poll done by Angus Reid/Staples Canada. That number is up more than 25 per cent from last holiday season, but 91 per cent of those surveyed still plan to purchase gifts at a bricks-and-mortar store.

"People still have an affinity for poking it, looking at it, squeezing it, whatever," explained Bruce Cran, president of the Consumers' Association of Canada.

"I think that still prevails today."

Many sale items can't be returned, which makes research that much more critical, he said. One thing to watch for this year is retailers trying to move merchandise they couldn't sell during the recession.

"There are a lot more attempts this year to push out stock that hasn't moved over the past couple of years during the financial crisis and items that are now being replaced by updated versions and more stylish models," Cran said. As for online buys, 46 per cent of British Columbians now do at

least some of their holiday shopping online, five points higher than the national rate, according to a Leger Marketing survey done for BMO.

Fifteen per cent also will rely on social media to decide where to shop over the holidays.

For those going shopping the old-fashioned way, Frye recommends shopping alone: "It's not a social event, in my opinion." Approaching the exercise with the right attitude is also key.

"It's a great savings, but with it comes a price, and that is the crowds, the hysteria and the parking situation," Frye said.

Smart shoppers who plan ahead, she pointed out, can save time and money by purchasing birthday and wedding presents for 2011.

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TOP TIPS FOR BOXING DAY SHOPPERS HITTING BRICKS-AND-MORTAR STORES ON SUNDAY

- Do your research online first, including checking Boxing Day flyers that are posted on web-sites tonight.
- Set clear goals. Shopping by yourself may increase your odds of achieving them.
- Attitude is important. Remind yourself of how much cash you're saving as you fight for parking spots and suffer through long lineups.
- Keep a running tally of how much you've spent.
- Bring a snack to avoid long lunch lines.