

# Super Bowl Of Shopping Is More Like A Scrimmage

BY ANNE D'INNOCENZIO  
AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK — The annual ritual of Black Friday, as we know it, is over.

Gone are the throngs of frenzied shoppers camping out for days ahead of the big sales bonanza on the day after Thanksgiving. And forget the fisticuffs over flat-screen TVs.

Instead, stores around the country had sparse parking lots, calm, orderly lines and modest traffic. Black Friday, which traditionally is the biggest shopping day of the year, almost looked like a normal shopping day. And not every shopper was happy about that.

In Denver, for instance, Susan Montoya had nearly an entire Kmart to herself Friday morning. Montoya half-heartedly flipped through a rack of girls' holiday party dresses and looked down the store's empty aisles.

"There's no one out here!" she said. "This is sad."

Black Friday for decades was a rite of passage for U.S. shoppers. Many would spend Thanksgiving evening combing through circulars to plot their shopping route for the next day based on the deals they hoped to snag.

But in recent years, retailers have started offering mega-discounts in stores and online earlier instead of waiting until Black Friday. And in the last few years, they've opened locations on Thanksgiving Day, a once-sacred holiday from retail.

That has led to the "graying" of Black Friday. In fact, according to the National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, nearly 60 percent of shoppers had already started holiday buying by Nov. 10.

Early numbers aren't out yet, but the retail group expected about 30 million people shopped on Thanksgiving and 99.7 million on Black Friday. It also expects about 135.8 million people will be shopping during the four-day weekend, compared with 133.7 million last year.

The group estimates overall sales for November and December will rise 3.7 percent to \$630.5 billion compared with last year.

Judging from the crowds so far, though, the shopper numbers could be hard to come by. "The frenzy and traffic levels were subdued," said Craig Johnson, president of Customer Growth Partners, a



BRIAN NGUYEN/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/TNS

Shoppers enter to shop Black Friday sales at a Target store in Chicago on Thursday.

retail consultancy. Here are the three biggest reasons for the graying of Black Friday:

### YOU DON'T HAVE TO WAIT FOR DISCOUNTS

Many stores pushed discounts on holiday merchandise early. Because of that, some shoppers weren't excited about discounts on Thanksgiving and Black Friday.

Jeff Simpson, a principal at Deloitte, also said doorbusters — fat discounts on hot items that once drew shoppers in for store openings — are losing their "umph." Ten years ago, major retailers would focus on the 10 best items and discount them below costs, he said. Now, many stores offer several hundred doorbusters, and many of the items don't carry a name brand.

"They got watered down," he said. "When you run that many doorbusters, can they really be that special?"

Some shoppers already are jaded about Black Friday deals. Take Bintou Cham, who got discounts of 40 to 50 percent at J.C. Penney and other stores in New York City, but was hoping for more.

"I was looking for 70 percent off," she said.

**MORE PEOPLE SHOP ONLINE**  
Many stores made their

deals available online and in stores for the official start of the season.

It's not clear whether that move made more people shop online instead of heading to stores. But Deloitte's Simpson said retailers need shoppers in the stores. "You tend to buy fewer items online," he said.

But executives from top retailers including Wal-Mart, Target and J. C. Penney dismiss the chatter about the irrelevance of Black Friday, saying they have worked hard to blend their online operations with the physical stores. Target, Wal-Mart, Toys R Us and J.C. Penney all said they were pleased with traffic both at the stores and online for the official start of the holiday season.

J.C. Penney's CEO Marvin Ellison said: "We saw customers going back and forth, researching online and then go to the stores." And Wal-Mart's Steve Bratspies, chief merchandising officer, said the chain saw more shoppers going back forth between its website and its stores compared with a year.

But sometimes retailers lose when customers go online. Ashley Walton got out early to go to stores on Black Friday, but she left disappointed. She said Wal-Mart didn't have the tablet she wanted for her son.

She solved that quickly by ordering it on Amazon.com.

### NO ONE IS IN A RUSH

Trend experts say there's no single item that's making shoppers rush to stores.

William Taubman, chief operating officer at Taubman Centers, which operates more than 20 U.S. malls, said that without a clear trend in fashion, there's less of an urgency to buy.

"The trend is no trend," he said.

For Pam Williams, the Black Friday shopping has lost a bit of its luster because there's no rush of getting a sought-after item. "They kind of took the fun out of Black Friday when they started opening up on Thursday," said Williams, who was shopping in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on Friday.

Not that there aren't any hot items. Jim Silver, editor-in-chief of TTPM, an online review site, said about 10 toys are already hard to find, including certain "Star Wars" toys. Still, there doesn't seem to be panic right now.

That's something Keith Nelson noticed as he stood in line on Thanksgiving, waiting for Toys R Us' 5 p.m. open: "Lines used to be longer, people would be sleeping and bringing lounge chairs out here," he said.

Toys R Us CEO Dave Brandon said the lines weren't as long as last year, but the traffic built throughout the night. He declined to give specific numbers.

### Search For Family Raises Questions

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — As Mariette Williams waited for her flight from South Florida to Haiti, she paced the departure lounge, folding and re-folding her ticket and clutching the handle of a bag sagging with gifts. She was excited but terrified: For the first time in nearly 30 years, she was about to see her mother.

Colas Bazile Etienne was a shadow at the very edge of her daughter's memories, staying out of focus no matter how hard Mariette tried. She knew her mother was a desperately poor Haitian woman who had given her up for adoption, but why? Because she had too many children? Because she wanted to give Mariette a better life? Because she had hoped for exactly this, that her daughter would one day come back to help the family?

All Mariette remembered of her childhood was leaving it, the flight she was about to do now but in reverse. She had looked at the clouds out of the plane window and thrown up on her dress. She knew she shouldn't expect too much from this reunion, but she couldn't help it.

"Outside of my wedding and the birth of my children," she said over the noise of the airport, "this is probably one of the biggest days of my life."

### Australian Christmas Tree Sets Record

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — An Australian set his third Christmas-themed world record in as many years Friday by illuminating a tree in downtown Canberra with 518,838 twinkling lights.

Guinness World Records confirmed that David Richards had broken the record for the most lights on an artificial Christmas tree that had been held for five years by Universal Studios Japan in Osaka. That 36-meter (118-foot) Japanese tree had set a new benchmark of 374,280 lights this month.

Richards, a Canberra lawyer and businessman, brought together a team of volunteers including an electrical engineer, structural engineer, welders, carpenters, masons and steel fixers to erect the dazzling display on a 22-meter (72-foot) steel tree.

Richards creates such Christmas extravaganzas to raise money for Canberra's Sudden Infant Death Syndrome charity, AIDS and Kids, by drawing large crowds and inviting them to donate.

"Some people say I've got quite a knack for getting people to do things for nothing," Richards said.

"I get people to do things for nothing because they know that I do things for nothing and I'm contributing my own money, resources, time and effort as well — so maybe they feel sorry for me," he added.

He set his first Guinness World Record in 2013 for the most lights on a residential property by covering his suburban home with 502,165 bulbs.

Traffic snarls in his neighborhood created by 75,000 sightseers who visited the display over four weeks made it difficult for his family to get to and from their home and irritated some neighbors. So Richards promised never to try to better that record.

He set his second record a year ago by stringing up 1,194,380 LED lights in a public space. The 120 kilometers (75 miles) of multicolored wire woven in the shape of three interconnected giant, wrapped Christmas gifts in a Canberra mall was the largest ever image made of LED lights.

But records tumble fast in the competitive world of light displays. Richards' 2014 record was smashed in June at a hotel in Myoko, Japan, by an image of a dragon comprising 1,529,103 lights.

His 2013 record for lights at home was beaten within days by a family in LaGrangeville, New York, that decorated their home with 601,736 Christmas lights, reclaiming their 2012 record.

### Hundreds Protest Jailing Of 2 Journalists

ISTANBUL (AP) — Hundreds of protesters gathered outside the Istanbul office of an opposition newspaper Friday, accusing the government of silencing critics and attempting to cover-up a scandal after two journalists were jailed on terror and espionage charges for their reports on alleged Turkish arms smuggling to Syria.

Cumhuriyet newspaper's editor-in-chief Can Dundar and the paper's Ankara representative Erdem Gul, were sent to a prison in Istanbul late on Thursday, accused of willingly aiding a terror organization and revealing state secrets.

The incident comes amid deepening concerns over media freedoms in Turkey, which aspires to join the European Union. In May, the paper published what it said were images of Turkish trucks carrying ammunition to Syrian militants.

The images reportedly date back to January 2014, when local authorities searched Syria-bound trucks, touching off a standoff with Turkish intelligence officials. Cumhuriyet said the images were proof that Turkey was smuggling arms to rebels in Syria.

The government had initially denied the trucks were carrying arms, maintaining that the cargo consisted of humanitarian aid. However, some officials later suggested that the trucks were in fact carrying arms or ammunition destined to Turkmen in Syria.

Prosecutors launched an investigation into the journalists after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan filed a criminal complaint.

Crowds filled the yard and a street outside of Cumhuriyet's headquarters, chanting: "Free press cannot be silenced."

Opposition legislator Baris Yarkadas said: "The government does not want any journalist to see what kind of a calamity they have involved Turkey in."

Mark C. Toner, deputy U.S. State Department spokesman, said in a statement that the U.S. is troubled by the arrests.

"The investigation, criminal charges, and arrest raise serious concerns about the Turkish government's commitment to the fundamental principle of media freedom," the statement said. "These events are only the latest in a series of judicial and law enforcement actions taken under questionable circumstances against Turkish media outlets critical of the government."

# EU Turns To Turkey To Help Manage Its Migration Woes

BY LORNE COOK  
Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Five years ago, Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi warned that millions of Africans wanted to come to the European Union and offered to make the continent's immigration problem disappear in exchange for billions of euros.

Despite Libyan rights abuses, Europe listened, and Italy signed a deal with the Gadhafi regime.

At a high-profile summit in Brussels Sunday, Europe's leaders will offer Turkey 3 billion euros (\$3.2 billion), an easing of visa restrictions and the fast-tracking of its EU membership process.

In exchange, Ankara is to tighten border security and take back some migrants who don't qualify for asylum in Europe. EU money will help build centers to hold them.

The Europeans hope Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan — who will not attend the summit — can be their savior, yet disturbing questions remain over Turkey's human rights record.

"He's king of playing hardball. He's a smart guy, he knows how to act, he knows what to say in order to achieve benefits," said Amanda Paul, a senior analyst

at the European Policy Centre think-tank.

According to the International Organization for Migration, almost 900,000 people have entered Europe this year seeking sanctuary or jobs. More than 600,000 have entered through Greece, many after making the short sea crossing from Turkey.

Though the distance is short, the crossing is dangerous. On Friday, six children drowned in the two separate accidents. In one case, two sisters, aged 4 and 1, drowned when a wooden boat capsized in bad weather near the Turkish resort of Bodrum. Hours later, four Afghan children drowned when their boat sank further north off the town of Ayvacik, a main crossing point for migrants trying to reach the island of Lesbos.

So Turkey has become an indispensable actor as the refugee emergency leads some European nations to shut down borders, crack down on security or erect razor-wire fences.

Many fear the future of Europe's 26-nation passport-free Schengen travel area, indeed the very project of European unity, is in jeopardy.

"We have to try to cooperate with Turkey because, in fact, we have no other options," European Council

President Donald Tusk told EU lawmakers last month.

An unpalatable truth is that the EU is well aware of Turkey's human rights failings — just as it was of Libya's — yet it again appears ready to set values aside in a quest to resolve its refugee crisis.

In a recent membership progress report, the EU criticized Ankara's interference in its justice system and Turkish government pressure on the media. Just this Thursday, two more opposition journalists were jailed in Turkey.

Yet the EU plans to designate Turkey a "safe country" for migrants, even as European countries grant asylum to fleeing Turkish nationals.

More than 2 million refugees from Syria live in Turkey, but according to Amnesty International, only around one in 10 are being helped by the government. The rest fend largely for themselves.

Beyond that, Irina McGowan from Amnesty's EU office says her organization "has documented cases

of people being forcibly returned to Syria and Iraq, having been intercepted by Turkish border guards on their way to Europe. That's a flagrant violation of international law."

None of this will stop the EU from reaching into its pockets. The only question is: how deep?

The European Commission has promised Turkey 500,000 euros (\$529,000) as part of the 3 billion-euro "refugee facility."

Member states are balking at their payments, though. Under a plan drawn up by the Commission, Germany would pay more than half a billion euros, Britain just over 400 million and France 386 million.

Greece and Cyprus have been refusing to pay. They have a long running feud with Turkey since it annexed the northern third of the Mediterranean island in response to an Athens-supported coup in 1974.

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My nomination for the 2015 Citizen of the Year is:

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