

Looking for a deal? You might want to skip the outlet mall

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Debbie CarlsonChicago Tribune

Patience is a virtue — especially when it comes to getting a deal.

The fall shopping season is here, but where are the best deals — at the outlet mall or at a traditional store during a great sale?

Generally, the answer is to be patient and wait for a sale, several shopping experts said.

The biggest reason, they said, is that outlet stores overall are no longer the places to get clearance products that were once in a brand's full-line store. Now, brands usually purchase merchandise solely for the outlet stores.

"Many brands and retailers produce merchandise specifically for sale in their outlet distribution that is never sold in their full-line stores. Therefore, what might look like a good deal is essentially a regular price for a given product. There are some exceptions to this, but they are now rare. Some analysts estimate that up to 85 percent of what you see in outlet stores was manufactured or purchased specifically for outlets and never spent a minute in a full-line store," said Doug Stephens, founder of Retail Prophet and author of "The Retail Revival."

Many full-line stores now have more clearance racks or special sales, said Lindsay Sakraida, director of content marketing at Deal News.

"A lot of those brands that previously would send items to outlets (because) they didn't want to appear as if they were having discounts seem OK with that now," she said.

Products at outlets may be lower in price versus a traditional store, but often they are lower in quality, too, the experts said.

"Outlets can still be good at any given moment you want a particular brand (and) you don't want to pay as much. You do have to keep in mind you probably aren't getting the same level of quality. ... You may still get that brand and that look if that's important to you, but it doesn't necessarily mean you're getting the same level of quality," he said.

Jeff Green, president and chief executive officer of Jeff Green Partners, a retail feasibility consultancy, said consumers should know that not only are the goods different, but other factors may be different too.

"It doesn't mean the same return policy; it doesn't mean the same warranty (as the full-line store). The reason is, if you buy at Macy's (full-line store), it's Macy's return policy, not the manufacturer. In the outlet, it's the manufacturer's return policy. You may get terms that are more consumer-friendly at the department store. The department store has a brand above and beyond one manufacturer," Green said.

However, shoppers at full-line traditional stores need to also watch whether items sold during big sales or on clearance can be returned, the experts said.

Some brands say upfront in the name that it's different from the traditional store, such as Gap Outlet or J.Crew Factory, they said.

Jill Cataldo, founder of Super-Coupons workshops, said that, while traditional shops may have special sales on holidays, the "outlets typically do not participate in the same, advertised promotional pricing that their regular retail counterparts under the same name do — think Black Friday and blowouts/door busters."

Even though outlets aren't what they used to be, shopping there still has appeal, Stephens said.

"For some, the outlet mall is a form of entertainment. For others, it's an opportunity to stretch a dollar. As long as you're not going to the outlet mall on the assumption that you're going to (get) deep discounts on true, full-line merchandise, you won't be disappointed," he said.

Cataldo, Green, Sakraida and Stephens all said they prefer shopping sales at traditional stores over the outlets because the deals can be better and the quality is known.

"If consumers want the most fashion-forward thing, that's what they should be going for," Green said.

In some respects, Green said, stores have taught consumers to wait.

"The last five years have been weird in the department-store industry. Macy's and Dillard's, using them as one example, have taught us to shop the sales. When I go into Macy's, my eye goes straight to the clearance rack. In Dillard's, I wait for their semiannual sale, and you can get stuff at 30 to 40 percent of the full price. I don't shop Bed Bath & Beyond unless I have that (20 percent off one item) coupon," he said.

There are ways to plan for sales. Sakraida said retailers will often roll out short-term sales around holidays, like Columbus Day or Veterans Day. Signing up for newsletters from favorite brands and following them on social media, where they may announce sales, can also lead to deals.

Stephens and Cataldo said shoppers can use price comparison apps like PriceGrabber to find deals. Another app, Flipp, rounds up all of the local shopping ads and circulars, she said.

Cataldo said that, with a little homework, consumers can score with sales anywhere.

"No matter where you shop, it's worth familiarizing yourself with what an item normally sells for when it's not on sale and what a fair price for the product would be. That way, when it does go on sale, you'll be able to better recognize a significant price drop into 'deal' range," she said.

Debbie Carlson is a freelance writer.

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