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SMART BLACK FRIDAY SHOPPING

Avoiding debt and cyber fraud



WITH Black Friday approaching and festive season promotions already under way, experts urge consumers to spend wisely. Just because it has a sale sticker on it, doesn't always mean it's a bargain. | OUPA MOKOENA ANA Studio

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BLACK Friday isn't a single day anymore – it's a month-long ambush on your bank account.

Yet, as the retail volume picks up, so does the risk. Black Friday remains one of the busiest, most chaotic periods on the retail calendar, and that chaos provides the ultimate smokescreen for fraudsters.

Between flashing countdown timers, "limited-time" app drops, and hyper-realistic scam sites, the modern sales frenzy is designed to make you act fast and think later.

Here is how to see past the retail hype, dodge evolving cyber threats, and actually save money without ruining your January.

Why your brain falls for the hype

The frantic behaviour seen during sales spikes isn't accidental or irrational. It is engineered. As marketing professor Alisa Minina Jeunemaitre observes, Black Friday is less a shopping event than a psychological arena where raw human instinct routinely overpowers financial logic.

Retailers trigger this reaction using scarcity cues and countdown clocks, purposefully designed to spark an acute Fear of Missing Out (FOMO).

FOMO is tied directly to loss aversion: the emotional sting of losing out on an opportunity registers twice as intensely as the pleasure of gaining an equivalent reward.

"Black Friday deals are often not actually the best discounts of the year. Many companies use algorithm-driven dynamic pricing based on consumer data, which means that some items may be priced similarly, or even lower, during other sales throughout the year," says Jeunemaitre.

"Yet, year after year, we eagerly line up outside stores at dawn or crash e-commerce servers with our frantic clicks. This isn't about logic; it's about emotion. Black Friday isn't just a shopping event; it's a psychological battleground where our instincts take over.

"Conscious consumption isn't about deprivation; it's about aligning your spending with your values," notes Jeunemaitre.

"Stepping back from the artificial panic of ticking clocks allows you to recognise that an item you did not need yesterday is never a bargain today," she adds.



STAY alert for online shopping scams. Cybercriminals use fake deals, websites and messages to steal personal and banking information. | Freepik.

The silent trap of "small" splurges

The shift toward deliberate spending is gaining traction amid sustained cost-of-living constraints. Palesa Ngomeza, retail sector lead of consumer markets at BDO South Africa, notes that local shoppers are moving decisively away from unthinking indulgence.

"Gone are the days of impulsive splurging. Today's consumers are demanding real value and meaningful discounts, not shallow promotional offers."

South Africa has witnessed an aggressive shift toward digital channels, with shoppers avoiding physical mall stampedes in favour of app-exclusive specials and digital payment ecosystems.

While e-commerce gives consumers the physical space to compare options calmly away from crowded aisles, it also makes it deceptively easy to rack up dozens of micro-transactions.

This cumulative spending is precisely where financial danger lurks. René Moonsamy, director at the National Debt Counsellors (NDC), warns that stretching sales over an entire month encourages repeated, small splurges that quietly devastate household stability.

"Before making a purchase, consumers should consider which future salary will pay for it, and what that salary already needs to cover," cautions Moonsamy. Sticking to a self-imposed limit on individual basket checkouts can still cause you to drastically overshoot what you can afford across November and December combined.

Neil Roets, chief executive of Debt Rescue, adds, "The real value of Black Friday should not be measured solely by the size of the advertised discount, but by whether a purchase delivers meaningful financial value without adding further pressure to household finances."

Inside the new wave of checkout scams

As shoppers turn in droves to e-commerce, cybercrime syndicates scale up their operations.

The co-founders of payments technology company Swiffy highlight that modern digital fraud rarely looks messy or unpolished. It often mimics the most trusted elements of the checkout experience.

"Black Friday fraud doesn't always look suspicious," explains Jadie Naicker. "Sometimes it looks like a legitimate checkout, a helpful customer service agent, or an ordinary banking notification. The smartest shoppers aren't necessarily the ones who find the biggest discounts, but those who know when to question a transaction before approving it."

Fraud syndicates now make sophisticated clones of prominent retailers, complete with scraped high-resolution product imagery, legitimate corporate logos, and convincing AI-generated customer service interactions.

Phishing campaigns, fake delivery status alerts, account takeovers, and fraudulent courier payment demands surge during peak trade.

Christian Di Zio says the presence of "https" and a padlock simply confirms that the connection between your device and the server is encrypted; it offers zero guarantee that the entity running that server is authentic.

Before hitting approve on any banking notification, cross-check the exact merchant billing name and purchase amount displayed inside your banking app against your actual order screen.

"Never let urgency override verification. A few extra seconds of caution before clicking 'pay' can make all the difference between a great deal and an expensive mistake," says Di Zio.

Swiffy advises that should an unauthorised charge occur, cardholders must immediately freeze affected cards via their banking app, contact their bank's fraud division through verified channels, update account passwords, and archive all order screenshots.

It also pays to find your banking app's card-freeze function and fraud reporting channels now, so that you can act quickly if something looks wrong.

"Never share an OTP or banking credential with anyone calling under the guise of an 'asset recovery agent'; criminals frequently target compromised victims a second time through follow-up recovery scams."

The smart shopper's defence playbook

Winning on Black Friday is about running strict defence on your balance sheet while turning seasonal discounting to your practical advantage.

Treat "Buy Now, Pay Later" (BNPL) as a tool, not free cash: Services like PayFlex, MoreTyme, and PayJustNow let you split costs with zero interest. Use them only for things you already budgeted for. Using them on impulse buys will just leave you broke when the bills hit in "Januworry".

Stockpile for January instead of buying gadgets: Skip the cheap TVs and electronics, which are often low-quality sale models. The best savings come from stocking up on everyday essentials you actually need, like non-perishable food, cleaning supplies and back-to-school items.

Use virtual cards for safe checkout: Create a disposable or temporary virtual card in your banking app (Capitec, FNB, Standard Bank, Discovery or Nedbank). You can cap the spend limit or let the card expire right after purchase, keeping your real bank account safe from hackers and scam sites.

Winning Black Friday without the remorse

Black Friday does not have to be an exhausting cycle of digital anxiety and buyer's remorse. When approached with intentionality, disciplined verification and a clear budget, it can serve as a practical opportunity to lower upcoming household expenses.

"This year, plan your purchases strategically, focus on what truly adds value to your life, and remember the joy of giving, not just to others, but also to yourself. Conscious consumption isn't about deprivation; it's about aligning your spending with your values," concludes Jeunemaitre.

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