

# Last-Minute Holiday Shoppers Will Pay the Price This Year

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by Tiffani Sherman

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From candy to tableware and decorations and even clothing, seasonal merchandise is everywhere. Sometimes months before the holiday, be it Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas or Valentine's Day.

But this year, here's a tip: Don't wait to buy what you want. It may be gone before the holiday even appears on the calendar. And don't expect those blow-out post-holiday sales that have let you stock up on seasonal merch for next year.

You'll likely find better prices at discount retailers but this year what may bug shoppers more than sticker price is the lack of availability of seasonal items as a specific holiday gets closer. You want Thanksgiving placemats and napkins? Buy well before Halloween.

"What we are definitely seeing, and I've been seeing for the last few years, is an increase in customers' appetite for seasonal products, whether it be Christmas or Halloween or Easter," said Lisa Surella, vice president and general merchandise manager for Bealls Outlet stores.

## COVID Pandemic Has Increased Appetite for Seasonal Merchandise

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The COVID pandemic is fueling heightened consumer demand.

"I think it stems largely from people wanting to celebrate holidays with their families. They're looking for something upbeat and fun and wanting that comfort of the holiday time period," Surella explained.

Based on last year, Surella and her retail colleagues are doing their best to predict the future.

“I’m not sure how this year will play out, but (there is) definitely an uptick in terms of desire for all things Christmas whether it’s apparel or home products,” she said. “At least that’s what we’re anticipating because we can see it already even with smaller holidays like Halloween.”

That means stores are ordering more merchandise, but they don’t want to have too much, meaning the days of great after holiday blowout sales for seasonal merchandise may be over.

Stores want to satisfy demand but they don’t want to end up with a lot of extra merchandise after any holiday, Surella said.

## Supply Chain Issues May Lead to Seasonal Shortages

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Those lingering supply chain issues may contribute to seasonal shortages this year.

“I think it is going to cause some things to be so late that we have to make decisions about what to do with it. There’s no point in having Christmas merchandise hit the floor the day after Christmas,” Surella said. That could mean warehousing it until next year.

“We bought a lot because we definitely felt there was going to be a big increase in needs this year, so I think we should be in a good position, but I definitely see some slides on those deliveries already.”

Don’t wait if you see something you really want.

Here’s a guide about the best time to buy everything if you’re looking to make a non-holiday purchase down the road.

## Retailers Know More About Their Customers

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Retail planning has also improved over the years, though COVID has put a crimp in that.

“With advanced data science, (retailers) have gotten better at planning and tracking your personal purchases said Theo Prodromitis, an experienced retailer, retail consultant and member of the National Retail Federation’s Small Business Retail Advisory Council.

Using loyalty programs and other tools like click and pick, retailers know what people have purchased in the past and what they are likely to buy in the future.

Prodromitis said if a retailer knows you buy Pokemon cards, they are going to let you know when they get seasonal Pokemon merchandise in the stores, and based on the number of past purchases, they know roughly how many to order.

“The more data they have on you, the more they can customize the seasonal merchandising,” she said.

Months before any holiday, Prodrornitis helps clients determine how much physical space retailers should devote to seasonal merchandise.

“(Retailers) measure every foot in a store as to how many dollars it will generate,” she explained. “So they make a plan about how much space they designate for seasonal merchandise and if they are displacing anything else, what they do (with those items.)”

She said post-holiday clearance blowouts have gone by the wayside because retailers are leaner and are more focused on the staple items, especially due to supply chain issues.

“They’re still serving customers, and yes they make money on seasonal items, but the staple of their business every day when somebody goes to (a place like) Home Depot is not the little dancing Christmas tree.”

## People Are Buying Seasonal Merchandise Earlier Than Ever

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You’re also not imagining things. The holidays seem to come around earlier and faster than ever.

Data from the National Retail Federation’s survey of 6,615 adult shoppers in November 2020 said 59% of people had started shopping for the late winter holidays in early November and more than 40% said they had started shopping earlier than they used to. More than half of the people said the pandemic has made them more interested in holiday decorations and seasonal items.

“We’re seeing things hit the floor early and honestly sometimes it is pure accident or an early shipment but when things hit early, we are seeing them unexpectedly sell very well,” Surella said. “I think it goes back to an increased appetite for those holiday products.”

Americana items were her big surprise this year. Surella said she typically starts selling red, white, and blue items around Memorial Day in late May. This year, it started selling much earlier in the year and lasted later than usual.

Her prediction for the winter holidays, family sleep items. We can’t seem to get enough of matching pajamas.

“That’s a category that does very well for us. I think those are things that at the right price are emotional and make you happy,” she said, adding they seem to sell early for family photos.

So when you see the perfect sleepwear for the whole family including fluffy and fido, grab it. You may not find it later.

*Tiffani Sherman is a Florida-based freelance reporter with more than 25 years of experience writing about finance, health, travel and other topics.*

