The history of Cyber Monday and what to expect in 2023

How Cyber Monday turned into Cyber Week, and then into Black November.

By Zoe Malin, NBC News, Sep 13, 2021/Updated Nov 10, 2023

Online shopping was booming in the years leading up to 2005, when the National Retail Federation (NRF) first coined the term "Cyber Monday:" Amazon was founded in 1994, eBay launched in 1995 and Walmart debuted its website in 2000. Shoppers quickly grew accustomed to adding items to a virtual shopping cart rather than a physical one. And yet, when Black Friday came around every year, e-commerce sellers felt left out of the revenue boost that was guaranteed for brick-and-mortar stores.

"With the growth of online shopping, online-only players like Amazon were looking for a way to capitalize on Thanksgiving weekend sales," says Katherine Cullen, the NRF's vice president of industry and consumer insights. "The Monday after Thanksgiving became dedicated to online sales, differentiating it from Black Friday."

Since the first "official" Cyber Monday in 2005, the event has evolved and grown into what's historically the biggest day for online shopping sales every year. But as the proportion of Americans who shop online increases — and retailers continue offering Black Friday deals online and in stores — how do we draw the line between where Black Friday stops and Cyber Monday begins? To help you better understand the shopping holiday, we consulted experts about what defines Cyber Monday (which is on Nov. 27 this year) and how it came to be.

Prior to the pandemic, there were signs that e-commerce was dominating the holiday season retail market, even on Black Friday, which is traditionally thought of as an in-person shopping event. In 2019, NRF data shows that for the first time ever, Black Friday topped Cyber Monday as the busiest day of the year for online shopping. This happened again in 2020, 2021 and 2022, which showed that one day dedicated to in-person shopping and another dedicated to online shopping were officially obsolete. The weeks leading up to and during the Cyber Five — the five day period between Thanksgiving and Cyber Monday — are an all-around shopping frenzy, whether it's online, in-stores or both.

Black Friday may see the most online shoppers, but Cyber Monday takes the cake for revenue, some of which has to do with retailers designing their websites and apps to pressure shoppers into checking out, says Dr. Ross Steinman, a professor of consumer psychology at Widener University. Many advertise Cyber Monday as shoppers' last chance to save and add clocks to web pages that countdown the seconds until midnight. This adds a gamification aspect to the sale, motivating shoppers to be competitive while deal hunting, says Steinman.

Overall, no event set Cyber Monday up for record-breaking success like the Covid-19 pandemic did in 2020. It forced many brick-and-mortar stores to shut down, sparking a massive surge in online shopping. And when it came to the holiday season, retailers pushed online sales more than ever before. They also reformatted their Black Friday and Cyber Monday events to run for weeks throughout November, in addition to closing for in-store shopping on Thanksgiving Day. These efforts led to customers spending $10.8 billion during Cyber Monday 2020, making it, at the time, the biggest online shopping day in U.S. history, according to Adobe Analytics.

Retailers' 2020 strategies boil down to promoting online sales and stretching them out over multiple weeks, which retailers continued during Black Friday and Cyber Monday 2021 and 2022. However, in 2021, online revenue on Black Friday and Cyber Monday fell for the first time ever by a little over 1% each, according to Adobe. Experts attribute the declines to shoppers taking advantage of early deals and spreading out their spending rather than concentrating purchases around specific days.

How early deals would impact Black Friday and Cyber Monday was experts' main focus in 2022, especially because Amazon kicked off holiday shopping sooner than usual by hosting its first-ever second Prime Day that October. But there wasn't a repeat of 2021, and sales were back up for both events. Adobe estimates total Cyber Monday 2022 sales to be around $11.3 billion, making it the largest online spending day in U.S. history to date.

Some say growth in retail sales is due to inflation, but consumer demand is responsible, according to the NRF, which attributes last year's positive performance in-part to record shopper turnout. During the five-day period from Thanksgiving Day to Cyber Monday, 196.7 million Americans shopped in stores and online, the highest figure since the NRF first started tracking this data in 2017. More people are more encouraged to shop Black Friday and Cyber Monday than ever before, whether they do so in-person or online. Weeks of deals make it convenient and stress-free, plus shoppers have an overall hunger for savings opportunities as economic concerns loom.

Looking Forward to Cyber Monday 2023

This year, experts expect to see similar Cyber Monday trends compared to 2022. Shopping early and shopping online is still the name of the game, and inflation makes the deals even more enticing. But attitudes around the United States' rocky economic landscape have shifted from panic to preparedness this year, says James Risley, a research data manager and senior analyst at Digital Commerce 360. Americans don't feel the same level of uncertainty around the rising cost of living, and they've used the past year to adjust their budgets, making room for wants and needs.

The NRF expects overall holiday sales this November and December to rise between 3% and 4% year-over-year. It's a slower rate compared to previous years, but it's consistent with the average annual increase in holiday spending of 3.6% from 2010 to 2019.

How Cyber Monday Emerged

Cyber Monday takes place the Monday after Thanksgiving and Black Friday. The NRF coined the name "Cyber Monday" in 2005, introducing it in a press release that described a new trend the group began noticing a few years prior: Without fail, online revenue and traffic spiked the Monday following Thanksgiving. Soon after, media outlets and retailers started using the term, too.

Like Black Friday, Cyber Monday was a response to consumer behavior, says Barbara Kahn, a professor of marketing at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. When people returned to work on Monday after the holiday weekend, they once again had access to computers and the internet (in the '90s and early 2000s, not everyone owned a computer or kept one at home like we do today). At work, shoppers could browse online-only retailers for deals, which gave them access to a new assortment of products they may not have found in stores, says Kahn. Retailers with an online presence in addition to their storefronts also hosted Cyber Monday sales, giving them the opportunity to reach a larger audience than just those who shopped in-person on Black Friday.

Beyond a new and more diverse assortment of deals, Cyber Monday was attractive to shoppers because it offered a convenience and flexibility Black Friday did not, says Kahn. People could shop whenever they had time on Cyber Monday. In short, you could score deals quickly and from virtually anywhere on Cyber Monday, which became part of the sale event's novelty.

Since most people now have around-the-clock access to the internet through their phones, tablets, laptops and watches, the original rationale behind Cyber Monday is "a bit archaic," says Kahn. But its legacy remains: Cyber Monday established a new type of holiday sale — one that occurred exclusively online — and stretched out the shopping weekend timeline.

The Blurred Line between Black Friday and Cyber Monday

Black Friday and Cyber Monday were once distinct events — one was for in-person shopping and the other for online shopping. But they've recently bled into one another. Black Friday is getting longer each year as some retailers offer sales starting in early November or even October. And Black Friday has been outpacing Cyber Monday in terms of number of online shoppers, although Cyber Monday historically grosses more revenue.

"We still use the terms 'Black Friday' and 'Cyber Monday,' but it's evolved so far beyond that," says Cullen. "Shopping is shopping regardless of what channel it's occurring on, which reflects a shift in consumer and retailer thinking. They're now shopping across multiple channels, depending on what's most convenient for them and their lifestyles."

This change in consumer and retailer thinking puts pressure on Cyber Monday sales to start earlier. Shoppers have come to expect early deals, so many direct-to-consumer brands and online-only retailers start their Cyber Monday sales months or weeks in advance of the shopping event itself.

But Cyber Monday sales don't always end on Cyber Monday, which extends the shopping holiday on the backend, too. Cyber Monday often turns into Cyber Week — many brands and retailers offer online-only sales that last the entire week after Thanksgiving.

Some businesses with both an online presence and brick-and-mortar stores differentiate between Black Friday and Cyber Monday by highlighting different deals. Others simply change the name of their sale from "Black Friday'' to "Cyber Monday" as the week goes by without offering new deals. That's led some retail experts to see Cyber Monday as a continuation of Black Friday rather than its own unique shopping event, creating what experts coined as "Black November" to describe the month-long promotions leading up to the sale events.