



REI #OptOutside Blazes New Trails for Black Friday

The words *Black Friday* have come to mean very different things to different folks. For many retail execs those words are deeply ingrained, translating roughly to: *The Most Important Day of the Year*. To shoppers, those words increasingly conjure up nightmares of stampeding deal seekers and rock-em-sock-em grandmas duking it out over the bargain bin. Possibly worst of all, for retail workers on the ground, it means leaving the Thanksgiving table earlier and earlier each year to work extended hours in that cauldron of consumerism.

Now imagine a world where *Doorbusters* are replaced by *The Great Outdoors*. That's the future that REI CEO Jerry Stritzke and his leadership team envision with their radical #OptOutside campaign, which launched in October and built through Black Friday. In a move that scuttles retail dogma, all 143 REI locations were closed on Black Friday 2015 with a message on their doors, web site, and social profiles to get outside and enjoy nature. Instead of joining their point-of-sale counterparts in the trenches, all 12,000 REI employees will receive a paid day off.

This campaign, baffling as it may be to retail traditionalists, speaks to an emerging corporate ethos that places the values of customers ahead of short-term dollars, focusing instead on brand integrity and lifetime value of the customer. To be clear, it is a great PR stunt if nothing else. But more importantly, it shows a willingness to adapt to a changing marketplace ahead of the curve. It takes courage (some would say hubris) to fly in the face of convention and abandon a top ten sales day. Still, emerging results from social media appear positive¹ and indicative of a broader trend we will explore.

In Social Business practice, we use both research and social data to re-examine *tried-and-true* business practices in order to find and exploit competitive advantages and unearth new ways of measuring success. For the retail sector in 2015, this means taking a sober view on the possibility that we are witnessing the beginning of the end for that most hallowed holdover from 20th Century retailing. It also means formulating a clear plan to fill that void.

¹ Source: Trellist Social Analytics, powered by Sprinklr



To start, let's look at some high level indicators of campaign performance:

- **Volume** - #OptOutside was mentioned on social media more than 115,000 times over Thanksgiving Weekend, with Twitter and Instagram comprising 94% of hashtag mentions. *[insert Volume Graphic]*
- **Engagement** - The vast majority of mentions were attached to user generated photos or videos of outdoor activities. This constitutes a much deeper level of personal activity and brand engagement than (for instance) a campaign whose key metric is garnering "Likes". *[insert a gallery instance featuring Tweets – see attached list of tweet links]*
- **Reception** - Sentiment overwhelmingly positive, confirming that the campaign aligned superbly with the values and wants of the REI audience. *[insert Sentiment Graphic]*

The rise of social as a mature medium has given a platform and a voice to the pervasive consumer resentment surrounding the bloating of Black Friday. In November 2014, Bankrate.com analyst Jeanine Skowronski told CBS Moneywatch, "Black Friday, I think, has a pretty bad rep now. People see the horror stories, they see the long lines. The casual Black Friday shopper of yesteryear is reluctant to go and brave that, largely because they don't have to."

In an attempt to extend the holiday shopping season earlier each year, retailers from Macy's to Home Depot began staged rollouts of holiday decorations and promotions prior to Halloween, drawing ire and exhaustion from many consumers. Social Listening reports and other sources of business intelligence confirm this backlash, leading many retailers including Staples, Gamestop, Costco and others to close their doors on Thanksgiving. REI, however, is the first to abandon Black Friday itself.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the National Retail Federation ([@NRFnews](#)) reported a marked decline in Thanksgiving Weekend spending between 2013 and 2014. Early numbers for Thanksgiving Weekend 2015 indicate a similar year-over-year decline in terms of aggregate dollars spent.², largely owing to lowered Average Spend figures.

Year	Total Shoppers	Average Spend	Total Avg. Spend	YoY Delta in Spend
2013	141,000,000	\$407.02	\$57,389,820,000.00	
2014	133,700,000	\$380.95	\$50,933,015,000.00	11.25%
2015	151,000,000	\$299.60	\$45,239,600,000.00	11.18%

² Source: *National Retail Federation - Thanksgiving Weekend Shopping Survey*, Prosper Insights & Analytics, 2013 - 2015



Always-on retailers like Amazon.com and Zappos have conditioned consumers to expect doorbuster discounts and great customer service 24 | 7 | 365 by delivering exceptional customer experiences. Combine this trend with an established backlash in consumer sentiment and shopping habits, and an ultra-competitive landscape between Black Friday and Cyber Monday – the prospects for Black Friday success begin to fade considerably.

While it is unlikely that retailers will completely abandon Black Friday in the near future, they should currently be considering alternatives to the one-upmanship and media clutter of advertising over Thanksgiving weekend.

As an option, retailers can choose to spend early 2016 creating an alternate plan:

- Generating business intelligence around your brand, products, and competitive landscape
- Focusing resources on re-aligning their brands with the values and sentiments they hear from customers
- Creating brand-centric shopping holidays that appeal to that core audience
- Shifting key metrics from only sales figures toward those that help evaluate customer experience and ensure the lifetime value of the customer

The lesson to be learned from REI: By avoiding the cross-cancellation that occurs during ultra-competitive periods like Black Friday, retailers have the opportunity to free up resources to rewrite the rules, and ultimately create unique sales holidays tailor-made to their individual brands - at any point in the year - with the ability to own them outright.

REI's Stritzke told CBS This Morning, "While the rest of the world is fighting it out in the aisles, we hope to see you in the great outdoors."

Have the courage to find your Brand's Great Outdoors.