



MIKE WORTHINGTON THE GAZETTE

Montrealers (from left) Maria Brotto, Evelyn Nembavlakis, Maria Kokinasidis, Carol Pitropakis, Nancy Kokinasidis and Anna Apostolakis drove to Burlington, Vt., for a two-day trip to take advantage of Black Friday bargains.

Where's *our* BLACK FRIDAY?

Swarming south to spend, Montrealers say they'd rather be shopping at home

PHILIP FINE

SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

BURLINGTON, VT. — Nancy Kokinasidis shows off an Old Navy black flannel shirt she purchased. It was \$3 U.S., and the camisole underneath cost \$2.40. These were discounts she was able to find the day before yesterday's actual Black Friday sale, for which she and her group of 11 Montrealers — friends, sisters and neighbours — came down to Burlington.

Her Friday, which began

with shopping at 3 a.m., was filled with visits to stores that offered deep discounts that most Montreal retailers could never match.

While Montrealers love Black Friday, some could be convinced to stay home if retailers here could rustle up some of the discounts they experienced yesterday. But could this city's merchants go as far as their border-town counterparts?

Black Friday traditionally marks the point when the U.S. Christmas shopping

season begins and retailers here start to see their books head into the black. This year, there had been much talk about Black Friday creeping into Canada, with many Canadian retailers, such as **Future Shop**, **Roots** and **Canadian Tire**, as well as Canadian outlets of U.S. retailers, such as **Sears** and **Old Navy**, offering sales to coincide with Black Friday. **The Source** even dared to challenge the criticisms that Canadian retail was being Americanized by actually

calling their sale yesterday, Black Friday.

For Future Shop spokesperson Elliott Chun, having a Black Friday special is part of their holiday strategy. "It has a trigger effect. If you've been procrastinating, this can help you get your Christmas shopping done."

The number of Black Friday deals in Canada have been on the rise. According to Derek Szeto, founder of redflagdeals.com, a 10-year-old bargain-hunting site recently bought by the **Yellow**

Pages Group. The reasons have to do with keeping up with the competitors both across and on this side of the border. He believes that a retailer like Future Shop, which saw challengers like the Source and newegg.ca holding Black Friday specials, launched their own specials in order to retain market share. "The Source would like nothing better than Future Shop to do nothing on Black Friday."

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SHOPPING Devotees say Boxing Day doesn't compare with Black Friday

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But this new-found love of Black Friday, which is held on the first Friday after American thanksgiving, may be a problem. The Christmas season – without these new discounts – is the strongest time of the year for Canadian retailers. And Christmas shopping began early in Montreal. According to recent numbers from the Retail Council of Quebec, more than a quarter of the province's shoppers started their Christmas shopping in October. So why would Canada need Black Friday if undiscounted Christmas shopping sales are strong and we already have the traditional Boxing Day and Boxing Week sales?

There are plenty of reasons, say several Black Friday shopping Montrealers with whom the Gazette spoke. They are not happy with the Christmas shopping status quo back home. They say sales taxes are too high in Montreal, stock is never as plentiful as in the U.S. and that the post-Christmas period, starting with Boxing Day,

is the worst time for sales – there's little money left to spend. "It's the time when I start thinking about the first Visa bill," says Kokinasidis.

At Burlington's University Mall, off Highway 89, Montrealers interviewed say Boxing Day sales cannot compete with the frenzy of discounts in the U.S., where coupons from the Internet can be applied to discounted merchandise, and where "door busters" dwarf sales already taking place in the store. A Montreal retailer would be hard-pressed to try and keep up with these sales or allow discounts on top of discounts. "On Boxing Day, you won't even see 50-per-cent discounts," said Julie Boileau, from Oka, here with her friend Melissa Arbic from Laval. She and others talked about using Black Friday to tick off much of their Christmas shopping lists, with Boileau also able to pick up a package of goods for a family in need. She bought about 15 items for them, from clothes to toys, and only paid \$60 (all amounts in U.S. dollars), with no tax on clothes or shoes.

While the American dollar is close to par against the loonie, even if the Canadian dollar was 10 cents lower, there would still be reasons to come, say many. A 90-cent dollar would make little difference they say when you costed in deep discounts and filled up the tank in the States. Janet DiManno, here with her adult daughter Julia, says Montreal retailers are not making any convincing arguments for her to have not shopped yesterday in the U.S. "They say not to, but they do nothing for us." She had just made a \$157 purchase where she had saved \$231.

For all the Montrealers Vermont attracts – a staff person at one hotel said 65 per cent of its guests came from Montreal specifically for the holiday – its economy, as is that of the country as a whole, is still suffering through a recession. Vermont had to recently lay off 3,000 in the retail sector and its discounts are driven by some very heated competition. That resulted this week in **Wal-Mart** staying open on Thursday's U.S. Thanksgiving holiday and

beginning its Black Friday at midnight, with many other large stores opening up at 3 a.m. and 4 a.m.

For local retailers, being part of a big chain can help them afford the deep discounts. **JCPenney** store manager Dorothy Micklas says having the 1,100-strong retailer negotiate with suppliers allows for some great discounts on Black Friday. "It's a huge negotiating tool." She says many suppliers make concessions for this one day and will also offer rebates, which allows her store to list the item for less but that part of the tab is picked up by the manufacturer. She says there are some profitable items and that bargain-chasing customers picking up those items, like socks, underwear and belts, will help "leverage the day."

While it may be difficult for Montreal retailers to keep up with the deep-discounting Americans, they can also depend on the fact that being a diehard Black Friday shopper takes perseverance and is not for the casual consumer. The group of 11, which has been coming every year since

2004, say they have developed several techniques to help them battle the crowds, customs, fatigue and confusion, and, of course, to obtain better deals:

■ To avoid lines, they pay at the smaller cash registers, such as the jewellery counter.

■ It gets hot and dry, so they make sure to always have water on them.

■ It's illegal, but some of them wear home certain items. "We come looking like vagabonds and leave looking like fashion models," said one of them.

■ They bring their own shopping bags. That way, when they have to separate their goods in the hotel room, there's no confusion over ownership.

■ They drink coffee and energy drinks to work a schedule that can run for an 18-hour stretch.

■ They buy something for their husbands to try and dissipate the potential fallout from them going over budget.

For Lianne White, who looks for discounts both at home and in the U.S. (every Tuesday night, she pours over

the Publi-Sac flyers), Black Friday is part of a tradition that takes her back to trips to visit her American mother's family. While she seems just as strategic as the Group of 11, at one point comparing notes with some of them and mock-exclaiming "I feel like I found my people," she does realize it takes a lot of effort to be a successful cross-border Black Friday shopper. She had to leave her son at home with her husband because he couldn't get a passport, and that some of the items bought can be of poorer quality, like a small HDTV that she almost bought that required a separate adapter to be bought with it.

Could a few more Black Friday sales in Montreal convince her to stay home? "Absolutely." Will there be even more Montreal retailers to add Black Friday to their Christmas shopping season next year? Perhaps. One thing is certain, though. It's going to be hard to compete with our American counterparts who with their blowout promotions can do deep discounting so well.