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Commentary: Regulate deals to prevent more retail tragedies

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By Aradhna Krishna

The recent death of a Wal-Mart employee during a Black Friday stampede was not the first time such a tragedy has happened. Three people were killed at an Ikea store in Saudi Arabia in 2004 during a giveaway of \$150 worth of free coupons to a few lucky customers, and five people were injured in England in 2005 during a store opening that offered a 45-pound sofa and many other such bargains.

Wal-Mart, too, has had injuries from prior stampedes in its stores. What does it take for the public to react? Even more important, what will it take for policymakers to put restrictions on store sales?

What can we do? We first need to examine why these things occur.

Of course, consumers like getting a bargain, but a really good bargain advertised very heavily can make people especially keen to get it. If we add to it an explicit limited offer (to the first 100 people, for instance), crowds will pour in to "get the deal."

But consumers still know that items at great discounts sell out fast, so they want to get in the stores early. Add to that a special store opening at midnight or 5 a.m., and the sense of urgency increases.

At the least, the crowd movement can be anticipated. It's fairly obvious that if the great deal is in electronics, then the crowds will move toward that department. And extra "temporary" staffing will be employed on big sales days.

But are the temporary people trained to deal with the "herd mentality"? Most probably not since the store will not want to invest extra time and money in temporary manpower. They will not anticipate the number and velocity of people who will pour in. The Wal-Mart employee who died was a temporary worker.

I offer the following thermometer of possible disaster. You get a score of 1 for each yes:

1. Is there a deal of the "First X number of people get deal" variety?

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2. Are there great deals but no rain checks?
3. Have the great sales been massively advertised?
4. Does the store sale open at an unearthly hour?
5. Is it a big shopping day?
6. Is it a low-price store?

A score of 6 implies a high chance of possible disaster.

How does one prevent a disaster?

The blame lies both with the consumers and with the retailers. At Ikea's England stampede in 2005, Ikea suggested consumers exhibited animal behavior. Isn't it animalistic when a human tramples another to save \$50? Will we willingly run over a child playing on the road if we are driving and can lose our job if we end up being late? Of course not.

But the human herd movement so prevalent during Black Friday shopping seems to me to be not even planned, but more random. It's like water spraying from a water hydrant whose turn wheel has become dysfunctional. So it is tougher to change such erratic behavior than to set policing policies for retailers.

I suggest the following list:

***Policy 1:** Allow no deals of the "First X number of people get deal" variety to be done in person. They can be done by mail, e-mail or phone.

***Policy 2:** Advertised discounts should have forced rain checks for the day of the sale (product to be supplied within a reasonable period, e.g., before Christmas if it's advertised for Black Friday).

***Policy 3:** Store hours should remain normal.

***Policy 4:** Store employees should have training in "herd control," which includes training of all temporary workers hired for big days.

If companies follow these policies, I predict we will see fewer disasters, and Black Friday will not take on a completely new meaning.

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