



Black Friday in March? Crowds swarm Lululemon warehouse sale

Article by: John Ewoldt

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It was like Black Friday in March, as hundreds of Lululemon-clad yogis crowded the Minneapolis Convention Center.

Doors opened at 8 a.m. as the fitness apparel phenomenon brought its warehouse sale to Minnesota for the first time. An hour later, hundreds of people were still waiting patiently in a holding area to be let into the sale. Hundreds more stood outside along 3rd Avenue S.

One Convention Center employee remarked that she saw fewer people in line to see the Dalai Lama last month than were waiting to be let in to the Lululemon sale.

"It was completely worth it," said Lauren Rowan of St. Paul. The Winona State college student bought 23 items, just shy of the 25-item limit. "I think I saved about \$250," she said.

As many as 15,000 Lululemon fans are expected for the sale that runs through Sunday. DJs perched on a platform on the sale floor kept energy levels high by spinning Katy Perry records and shouting out to customers, some of whom flew in from Denver just for the sale.

Most items are discounted 50 percent, with sale prices ranging from \$4 for headbands and socks to \$74 for jackets, vests and hoodies.

Still, Rowan said that she heard from a few shoppers who were underwhelmed. No Wunder Under black pants, for one thing, the brand staple. Emily Faltesek was disappointed in the color selection. "I was hoping for more basic black and gray instead of bright yellow and other seasonal colors," she said.

Still, Faltesek spent \$250 on five items after waiting in line for two hours.

Minneapolis is the latest of only a few U.S. cities to host the Vancouver-based company's warehouse sale, including Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. "We chose the Twin Cities because it's a healthy, active, fit market that's been super-supportive of Lululemon," said Brooke Johnson, the line's community relations coordinator.

Lululemon has stores on Grand Avenue in St. Paul, Mall of America, West End in St. Louis Park, Galleria in Edina and an



Feed Loader,



Lauren Rowan and Taylor Munson of St. Paul bought about 20 Lululemon items each at the Minneapolis Convention Center.

Feed Loader,

Albertville outlet store.

Beth Perro-Jarvis, a retail brand expert at Ginger Consulting in Minneapolis, said it's an expensive prestige brand that does well with teens as well as 40-ish women. "It's workout gear with style built in," she said, "but many women are wearing it as everyday wear, not just to the gym."

So why are so many women and a few men willing to spend hours in line instead of driving to an outlet mall? Perro-Jarvis said the discounted prices are lower at the warehouse sale.

"Outlet prices are rarely any better than the last markdown price in the regular store," she said.

Lululemon's popularity has endured despite a fabrication flap a year ago. The stock fell 33 percent after a quality control issue that the company described as "an unacceptable level of sheerness."

But Barbara Wyckoff, an equity research analyst at CLSA in New York, is confident that the company is back on track with a new "take it back, no questions asked" policy if a customer is concerned about quality.

"This was a company that grew too fast," she said. "For a while they were winging it, but now they have new quality, testing and production standards in place."

Johnson said that all of the items at the warehouse sale are first-quality.

The sale runs from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. through Sunday while supplies last. Items will be restocked throughout the sale, but past sales have had popular items sold out by Saturday afternoon.

Those who miss this weekend's sale may have to wait years before it returns to Minneapolis. "We like to spread these annual events around the country," Johnson said.

John Ewoldt • 612-673-7633

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