



Sale Fail: Consumer Group Tracks Major Retailers' Sale Prices for Months, Finds Many Discounts Bogus; Shopping Around is Key

WASHINGTON — “Regular price: \$299, our price: \$199.” “This weekend only: Save 40%!” Prime Day! Black Friday! Better buy it now! Americans have become accustomed to – and addicted to – sales. But according to a new investigation by the nonprofit consumer group Consumers’ Checkbook (Checkbook.org), most stores’ sale prices—even those that advertise big savings—are bogus discounts, with retailers offering the same “sale price” more than half the time. The investigation found that nearly all retailers use fake sales to mislead their customers. And this shady selling practice keeps getting worse.

Beginning in February 2025, once a week for 24 weeks Consumers’ Checkbook’s researchers tracked the prices offered by 25 national chains for 25-plus items at each store. Researchers selected on-sale products representative of each company’s primary offerings (i.e. power tools at Home Depot, clothing and housewares at Kohl’s, big-ticket electronics at Best Buy).

This research expands on similar projects Consumers’ Checkbook completed in 2015, 2018, and 2022, when each time it spent 40 or more weeks tracking major retailers’ prices. Over those 10 years, fake sales have become far more prevalent. During Consumers’ Checkbook’s 2018 project, six retailers—JCPenney, Kmart, Kohl’s, Macy’s, Neiman Marcus, and Sears—offered at least half of the tracked items at fake discounts more than half the time. Now, far more of the stores—21 out of 25—advertised sale prices more than half the time.

“By constantly offering items at sale prices—and rarely if ever offering them at regular prices—retailers are engaging in deceptive advertising to boost their profits,” said Kevin Brasler, executive editor of Consumers’ Checkbook. “Seeing 50 percent or 60 percent off a regular price doesn’t mean anything. The only way to make sure you’re getting the best deal is to shop around.”

Consumers’ Checkbook found nearly every store in the study was guilty of using misleading sales. Some retailers have more egregious pricing practices than others. Bass Pro Shops, Bed Bath & Beyond, Dick’s, Foot Locker, Gap, JCPenney, Michaels, Nordstrom, Old Navy, and Wayfair were the biggest fake-sale offenders. Most of the items tracked at those stores were always or almost always on sale.

Only Apple, Costco, and Dell consistently conducted legitimate discounts. Walmart was a borderline case: Ten of the 24 items researchers tracked for it were on sale at least 50 percent of the time; overall the items tracked at Walmart were on sale 48 percent of the time.

Banana Republic and Lululemon were outliers. Each offers discounts on only a small number of items each week, but most items researchers tracked were marked as “Final Sale” for the 24 weeks of the investigation. The other 19 retailers labeled their items “on sale” about 76 percent of the time, on average, meaning that far more often than not, they promoted prices as discounts that weren’t special.

To view Checkbook's full report, visit Checkbook.org/SaleFail.

About Consumers' Checkbook

Consumers' Checkbook (Checkbook.org) is an independent, nonprofit consumer organization, founded in 1974. Its mission is to educate consumers and to help them get high-quality services and products at the best possible prices. In addition to working on national projects, Checkbook publishes Consumers' Checkbook magazine in print and online in the Washington, D.C., San Francisco Bay, Puget Sound, Twin Cities, Chicago, Boston, and Delaware Valley areas, with ratings of service providers ranging from dentists to plumbers. Checkbook is fully funded through subscription and publication sales, fees for information services, and consumer donations, and does not accept advertising dollars or other support from businesses so there can be no question of bias.

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