

## Valley retailers ramp up temporary hiring for holiday rush

By Tim Sheehan

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Black Friday – the frenzied day after Thanksgiving that traditionally marks the start of the holiday shopping season – is just a few precious weeks away, and savvy shoppers already are priming themselves with strategies for finding the best deals.

But for retailers, Black Friday also marks the start of a particular brand of madness for which they, too, must prepare. In Fresno, across the Valley and nationwide, merchants are hiring a slew of temporary employees to put additional bodies on their sales floors, in their stockrooms or in their distribution centers.

Since 2010, retailers in Fresno County that cater to holiday food and gift shoppers have added an average of 1,830 workers in the fourth quarter, according to figures from the state Employment Development Department. It's a surge that is likely to be repeated this year, but the extent of the additional hires won't be fully known until after the end of the year, and in the past many of those seasonal workers have been let go in the post-holiday lull.

At Fresno's Fashion Fair mall, the Bath & Body Works store began recruiting its seasonal temporary workers in late September and finished its hiring last week, said manager Amber Aikens. The store normally employs about 10 people, but 35 more have been hired and are going through training to be ready to handle customers when Black Friday, Nov. 27, arrives.

Other smaller stores are hiring only a few extra people. At Angl, a women's clothing store at Fashion Fair, manager Brenda Mireles was accepting resumés last week in hopes of adding five part-time sales associates who have previous retail experience. "It gets pretty crazy," Mireles said. "We need someone who can handle all the pressure." She plans to begin interviewing hopefuls this week.

In just one morning last week, she received five resumés. But not everyone looking for a job seems to understand the rigors of dealing with a flurry of customers, Mireles added. "We're getting a lot of girls who think it would just be cool to work in a clothing store," she said. "They think, 'Oh, this will be easy' ... or they like the idea of an employee discount."

#### Walmart, Target lead hiring

Fashion Fair's website offers a listing of jobs at some of its tenant businesses, but a few storefronts in the mall also have signs posted welcoming people to apply for temporary jobs.

At The Body Shop, near the food court, manager Sara Regan said she needs to hire five people for the holidays. The skin-and-hair-products store was planning an open house late last week for job-seekers and expected between 35 and 50 people to attend, but even before that, Regan said she was receiving plenty of applications.

In recent years, discount department stores such as Walmart or Target represented the retail sector with the greatest increases in hires in Fresno County for the last three months of the year – an average of 450 more workers per year over third-quarter figures since 2010. That's followed by clothing and accessory stores, a sector that added an average of 312 workers each year. Large department stores, including companies like Macy's or JCPenney, averaged 243 extra fourth-quarter workers. The figures, based on information from the EDD, make no distinction between full-time and part-time workers.

#### National picture

"We've seen increased (seasonal) hiring since we came out of the recession pretty much every year, growth each year," said Matthew Shay, president and CEO of the National Retail Federation. "Our expectation this year is the hiring is going to be between 700,000 and 750,000." Last year, he added, the actual figure was about 715,000, "so we're on pace to do as well or more than we did last year."

Macy's, the national department store chain, reports that it plans to hire about 85,000 workers nationwide for the holiday rush – about the same as last year, said Betsy Nelson, a Macy's spokeswoman. More than 1,000 extra workers will be hired in the nine-store Macy's district that includes the chain's Fresno and Visalia stores, as well as five East Bay stores and two furniture stores.

“For stores, we begin hiring in mid-to-late September and the positions are generally in place through Christmas, with some extended through mid-January,” Nelson said.

And sometimes, what start as seasonal jobs can turn into permanent work with the company. “In some cases, as year-round positions open during the holiday season, we promote someone who is already with us in a temporary position,” Nelson said. “When hiring associates throughout the year, we often draw from the pool of former seasonal associates.”

WalMart, the discount retail behemoth, reports that it plans to hire more than 3,200 seasonal workers for its 302 California stores as sales associates, cashiers and stockers. Last year, the company reported that more than half of its seasonal hires stayed on after the holidays as permanent employees.

But not all of the hiring is for in-store workers. The growth of online shopping is forcing retailers to adapt their seasonal hiring to accommodate the changing habits of shoppers. “That mix (of employees) has evolved from a time when it was a substantial portion of store associates to now distribution centers and folks working on digital and fulfillment in online,” said Shay, the NRF chief executive.

One example is Best Buy, the big-box electronics and appliance retailer. In addition to its in-store sales force, the company announced that it plans to fill about 600 seasonal positions to work at its distribution center in Dinuba through the end of the year. Those hires, being made through a temporary staffing firm, will be a combination of general warehouse workers who unload trucks and pack products for shipping to stores, and merchandise processors who retrieve merchandise from racks to fulfill customers’ online orders.

“Retailers have been able to be adept at matching the needs of the consumer and the shoppers lately, and they’re getting a lot more information about spending patterns” from online shopping as well as their brick-and-mortar stores, said Jack Kleinhenz, the NRF’s chief economist. “So they’re tracking very closely consumer traffic to the extent they’re going to staff accordingly.”