# Christmas Creep

Preseason retail promotions seemingly add weeks to holiday

BY TRACY SCOTT FORSON

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**IT OFTEN CATCHES YOU** by surprise. As you walk through your favorite department store shopping for the perfect accessory to make your Halloween costume a hit, you hear the faint melody of Jingle Bells wafting through the speakers. Then, you notice that next to the witches' masks and superhero capes, there are Christmas tree decorations. But it's only mid-October!

Even before they sell out of back-to-school supplies, some retailers are stocking shelves with holiday décor and gifts. While some consumers may appreciate the reminder that "the most wonderful time of the year" is on its way, for others, that preseason prompt just signifies how commercial the holiday has become.

Tim Kasser, professor of psychology at Knox College in Illinois and co-author of the 2002 study *What Makes for a Merry Christmas?*, says retailers are the reason the season seems to be inching its way into fall, encouraging shoppers to start their holiday hunting before daylight saving time arrives.

"The problem with that is, when people focus on the commercial aspects of Christmas, they seem to be less happy at Christmastime," says Kasser. "When Christmas creeps deeper and deeper into the earlier parts of the year, it's spreading a value message and an approach to the holiday that research suggests undermines people's well-being."

When the season is extended, that's longer periods of stress as consumers spend more time searching for the perfect gifts and often stretch their budgets.

However, Brian Earl, host of a holiday-themed Christmas Past blog (*christmaspast.media*), finds solace, not stress, in the season and chooses to write about the Christmas year-round. Episodes of his complementary podcast are posted between Thanksgiving Day and Dec. 25.

And while he's no fan of summertime Christmas displays, Earl doesn't mind retailers promoting the season prior to Black Friday.

"From Nov. 1 on would not be an unreasonable time to think about (Christmas). Halloween is the official beginning of the holiday season," says Earl. "I think eight weeks is a reasonable time to celebrate the season. That's perfectly OK with me."

**IN 2016**

**24%**

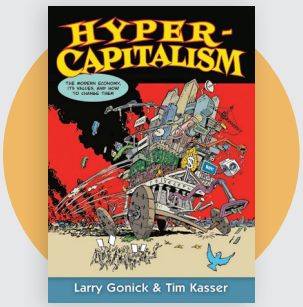
of consumers began holiday shopping in September.

SOURCE: Nielsen

Although gift-giving is a major part of Christmas celebrations, Earl's blog highlights the traditions and history of the holiday. When people focus on themes other than shopping and materialism, they tend to enjoy the Christmas season more, Kasser says. Specifically, spending time with family and focusing on religion tend to result in a more satisfying holiday season, his study found.

So, when those Christmas displays pop up shortly after Labor Day, Kasser suggests turning your attention to more meaningful yuletide practices, not just the gift-giving.

"I view Jesus as one of the great anti-materialists of all time," says Kasser, who is not a Christian. "Focus on what Christmas at its deepest level really means. … It means thinking about your family and connections to others, doing good deeds for others and helping other people."




## RESISTING RETAIL

Researcher Tim Kasser, author of *The High Price of Materialism* and co-author of *Hypercapitalism: The Modern Economy, Its Values, and How to Change Them*, has found that a focus on retail and shopping during the holidays leads to feelings of sadness, anger and anxiety. "The more people said they were focusing on spending, the more they reported being stressed and having unpleasant emotions," he explains.

Kasser offers these tips for resisting Christmas creep:

**Disengage.** Try to avoid those preseason promotions that focus on presents. Install an ad block on your computer, so you don't see Christmas pop-ups, and support businesses that do not succumb to Christmas creep.

**Redirect.** When those ads show up in October, consider them reminders to start making some end-of-the-year donations to charities or start planning family get-togethers. "That's opposite of what the marketers want you to think about," he says.

**Create.** "There are ways to give people things that are more meaningful," says Kasser, who gives his children coupons that require him to take on their chores or allow them to skip vegetables and still get dessert. When their children were younger, Kasser gifted his wife a coupon that required him to be on nighttime baby duty while she rested. "Those things are pretty meaningful."

*— Tracy Scott Forson*

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