

Holiday crush and delivery delays ahead

NOTTO FREAK you out, but we have another crisis in the making. Two forces are converging to create more seasonal stress than usual this year.

As if 2020 hasn't been hard enough, we now have twin tsunamis on the holiday horizon. First, sellers of holiday merchandise are reporting an early rush and greater-than-expected demand for Christmas décor, which means inventory is selling out sooner. (People want their joy now already!)

If a looming décor shortage wasn't enough to make you hit the buy-now button, the second, pandemic-related trend is longer-than-usual shipping times, which means if we don't hurry, we'll have ourselves a merry little New Year's.

Please pause here and take a yoga breath. We can get through this.

"Holiday décor buying across the board has been off the charts," said Mac Harman, owner and founder of Balsam Brands, a leading maker of artificial trees and other holiday décor. Since July, holiday décor sales at his company were up 50% over last year. "Some days were up 200%."

The trend is not unique to the United States. Balsam Brands' online sales are also up in the UK, France and Germany.

This is not just happening at his company. Treetopia also reported that sales were up 50%. "Because vendors didn't plan for the demand, inventory is running out," Harman said.

The holiday buying spree started early. Historically, folks start searching for holiday items and ideas in September. However, this year, a Pinterest report pins the start of the Christmas crunch to April. Christmas-related searches for gift ideas, recipes



Decking the halls early Jennifer Lutz, of Hillsdale, Michigan, decorated a Christmas tree for her four kids, ages 11 to 14, this year the day after Halloween. She put up the rest of her holiday décor, including two more trees, the following week. "It gives us something to look forward to," she said. *Photo courtesy of Jennifer Lutz*

and décor were 77% higher this past April than they were in the same month last year, the report said.

"The rush started early and hasn't stopped," Harman said. "It's only accelerated. "The day after Halloween, boom! We didn't see it coming."

The decorations have been going up earlier, too. Celeste Boehm, of La Cañada, California, is among those who wanted to get that Christmas spirit early. Boehm normally puts her Christmas decorations up around Thanksgiving, but this year they went up on Oct. 23, she said.

"Staying home every day made every day feel the same. Having Christmas decorations up takes me to a happier place and fills me with a feeling of anticipation," she said.

Boehm is not alone. "Customers started showing an interest in holiday décor far earlier than they have in years prior," said Sarah Fishburne, director of trend and design for The Home Depot. "Clearly, people are craving the holidays and looking forward to bringing the joy home sooner."

"A lot of people can't wait for 2020 to end," added Harman, "and they are going to try to make that come faster by making Christmas come sooner. They are tired of the stress from, you name it: COVID, politics, racial tension. They want the joy that Christmas brings, and they want it now."

Only, due to widespread ship-

ping delays, which have become the norm, they might not get it now. This holiday season, retailers may not be able to send products fast enough to meet consumer demands, industry experts warn.

The coronavirus has already driven online shopping and shipping to its peak. Add holiday shopping and sending to the mix and that really puts a crimp in the Christmas stocking.

"The country simply doesn't have the shipping capacity," said Harman, who keeps a close eye on distribution. "It's not simply a matter of hiring more drivers and getting more trucks. The sorting facilities are at their maximums, so stuff sits. I'm telling everyone I know to buy their Christmas presents now. Last minute won't cut it."

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