28 NOVEMBER 2023 / Taking Tuesday

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN

VICTORIA CHAMBERLIN (producer): Ahhh… Black Friday. Cyber Monday. Ordering all my things. Crossing names of the list. I’m so ahead of the game this year.

No last minute shopping for me. I’m first minute shopping, baybeee!

But wait!   
  
Oh no!   
  
After Cyber Monday comes …

SCORING OUT

PATRICK BOYD (engineer): HEY, MAN! GET BACK HERE WITH MY PACKAGE!

VICTORIA: …TAKING TUESDAY!

METAL SCORING IN

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS ANCHOR: In Washington state, some homeowners are fighting*

*back. They’re tired of people stealing their packages.*

*<CLIP> KCAL NEWS ANCHOR: The LAPD has busted a sophisticated package theft ring …*

*<CLIP> INSIDE EDITION: Thefts of packages left in buildings and front porch doorsteps is surging nationwide. A whopping 1.7 million packages a day.*

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Ahead on *Today, Explained*: the very annoying and hard to solve problem of porch pirates and your stolen packages.

And a great alternative you may have forgotten about.

But thankfully Gen-Z remembers!

[THEME]

WHIZY (Vox Reporter): Okay. Hi, my name is Whizy and I am a senior reporter at Vox covering money, the economy, consumer issues and trends. Just anything under the sun, really.

SEAN: Whizy – just Whizy, like Beyoncé – her latest opus is all about package theft, which might be even worse than usual for Americans this week.

WHIZY: Yeah, absolutely. Actually, Some studies say Cyber Monday is the worst day for package theft because it's all about, like, that nice, shiny, expensive tech that you're getting delivered to your home, right? So especially Cyber Monday, I think people need to watch out.

SEAN: We asked Whizzy if this problem of package theft is getting worse in America. Because, anecdotally, it certainly feels that way.

WHIZY: I think the answer is maybe? Probably? That's kind of like what I found through my reporting. It feels like everyone's talking about packages being stolen.

SCORING IN - WACKY ELECTRO (APM)

*<CLIP> PORCH PIRATE WATERFALL: “In Pittsburgh Huston and Los Angeles, these alleged porch pirates are quick and brazen / Watch as this man in broad daylight is caught on not one but 5 security cameras ripping into this package / She’s a porch pirate disguised as an Amazon driver / This homeowner says he was so exasperated with front porch thievery he rigged a package that detonates when it’s lifted.”*

WHIZY: If you only looked on Nextdoor and the Ring camera forums, you would think that this was the biggest issue that Americans are currently facing, And I imagine that has some kind of effect on our psyche, too. If you're on these places where constantly you're being barraged with messaging about how bad it is and just even the growth of doorbell cameras around the country has led to this sort of vigilante culture, right? Where people are constantly surveilling other people, It's so just hyper vigilant about the possibility of package theft. So it definitely feels like the dial. On talking about package theft has gone way, way up. But the problem is we don't actually have really good recent hard numbers on it.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Huh? Why not?

WHIZY:I think a lot of retailers don't want to reveal that information if they even track it themselves internally. And a lot of researchers just haven't really studied it over time yet. So it's really unclear how bad the epidemic is, in part because even law enforcement's like, well, we're not going to focus specifically on this thing. And only about 9% of people even bother reporting package theft to the police. But, you know, there are a few studies out there. Consumer Reports did one I think, in 2021, and it was supposed to be representative of the US population and all of that. And that one found that maybe around 11% of people have experienced package theft, which, you know, it's not some overwhelming thing that, you know, everyone is getting affected, but certainly people are dealing with it.

SEAN: Why aren't companies telling us more about what's going on here? Why aren't they giving us the numbers?

WHIZY: Well, I think the M.O. of most companies is that they don't want their customers to worry about their services. They just want us to think, ‘Hey, everything's going to be super easy and cheap and quick for you. Don't worry, you're a little head about it!’

*<CLIP> WALMART COMMERCIAL: “Just make another order. Deliveries are free and unlimited. It’s easy!”*

WHIZY: And I mean, e-commerce is still a very much growing sector. You know, we talk about online shopping all the time and most of our shopping now starts online. So by that, I mean people will search for something on Google. Look around, see what retailers even would carry this product. But only 15% of purchases are still made online. So there's still a lot of room to grow. In that growth stage of course they want you to think, ‘No, things are great!’ This is so easy and convenient for you to just have things delivered.

SEAN: And when a package gets stolen, be it an Amazon package or something from Best Buy or, or Tiffany and Company or whatever, who bears the brunt of that cost? Who's really losing out there?

WHIZY: Often the cost of shipping is either priced into the cost of a good. Or more increasingly, increasingly, we pay for it sort of upfront with a subscription like Amazon Prime or Walmart Plus. So that's at the end of the day, I would say consumers pay for it. But when a package gets lost as of now – if you say, you know, my package is stolen, it's just not where it's supposed to be – most big retailers take a pretty generous view of it, and they'll send you a refund or replacement pretty easily. And you're good.

SEAN: So I guess this brings us to a very important question, which is, is anyone along the line doing anything to actually stop all of the theft? The millions upon millions of packages that are being stolen every year?

WHIZY: I would say that Amazon is definitely doing something. They're sort of the leaders on this from start to finish. Not only is our customer service pretty generous, but also I'm sure people have noticed by now Amazon has so many of those lockers in apartments and in businesses.   
  
SEAN: Mmm.

WHIZY: You can choose to have your packages delivered there and just pick them up after work or whenever you have a free minute.

SEAN: Okay, so that's Amazon. But what about, you know, the little guy and the mom and pop and what have you?

WHIZY: Yeah, that's where it gets tougher because like I said, shipping is so expensive. If even a small percentage of people are saying, hey, my package, ‘My order was stolen,’ that's going to cost them way too much to try to just replace and provide that Amazon-like customer service.   
SEAN: Mm-Hm.  
  
WHIZY: So a retailer like Etsy, actually, I think they're rubbing up against this a little bit because even though Etsy is like this big famous company, they're made up of individual third party sellers, right? And individual Etsy sellers might feel a little bit like, okay, I can't afford I can't afford to do this.

SEAN: So where does that leave us? I mean, do you just have to do all your holiday shopping or whatever it might be with the expectation that you might get robbed?

WHIZY: <chortles> I think some people will continue to just take their chances, especially if it hasn't really bothered you up until now. You're still pretty much trusting of the service. I think for people who have dealt with package theft before, definitely for time sensitive or expensive things, gifts around the holiday season, they might see more and more of an incentive to maybe browse online for the best deal, but actually go to the store to pick up the item.

SEAN: Mmmmm! Going back to the store, that's always an option!

WHIZY: Yeah. Yeah. It turns out we can't live our entire lives online.

SEAN: Are people taking that option, Whizy?

WHIZY: They definitely are. Something that's emerged out of the pandemic is actually that we thought that e-commerce has taken over and we're never going back. Actually that hasn't panned out. E-commerce surged hugely during the pandemic, but it's actually gone down quite a bit since, you know, stores and businesses and everything reopened and there's been a huge rise actually in people choosing that mix of ordering online, but picking up in-store or doing curbside pick up, things like that.

SEAN: People want to talk to other people?

WHIZY: They like the customer service, yeah, of talking to actual humans instead of a chat bot. And also just the security of knowing exactly when you can, you know, roll up to a store and have an item in your hands. And stores don't mind that either because like I said, you know, shipping is expensive. And also if you have a brick and mortar location and you get a customer in the door, they're much more likely to spend more money while they're in the store browsing, seeing random things.  
  
SEAN: Mmmmm.  
  
WHIZY: So it's sort of a win-win.

SCORING IN - Marathon Life

WHIZY: One of the biggest things that I felt reporting this story was the awareness of package theft and the obsession over it is more of like a symptom of this bigger thing where we're realizing unlimited growth of online shopping and home delivery, maybe isn’t sustainable? It's already showing some kinds of issues, obstacles with package theft, but also just our streets are overrun with delivery vans and people just always ferrying things around. So I think this is just one example of where online shopping, home delivery is not this perfect solution to all of our shopping needs.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Whizy! She writes for Vox! Find her stuff at Vox dot com.

Turns out there’s this place that has everything you need. No, not Amazon. We’re going back to the everything store that doesn’t deliver when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

We’re going to the mall!

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

<BUMPER> [store sounds] *“Attention Kohls shoppers, there is a clearance at Today, Explained.”*

SEAN: Sean Rameswaram. Former mallrat, former mall employee. But that was, like, twenty years ago. No one goes to the mall anymore, right?  
  
Wrong!

Apparently Gen-Z goes to the mall! According to the International Council of Shopping Centers, which I’m told is real, Gen-Z’s more interested in the mall than Millennials and Gen-X.

*<CLIP> MALLRATS (1995): Brodie: There is something out there that can help us ease our simultaneous double loss.*

*T.S.: Ritual suicide?*

*Brodie: No, you idiot, the fucking mall!*

SEAN: You know who else hasn’t given up on the mall? Alexandra Lange.

ALEXANDRA LANGE (reporter and author): I'm the author of *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall*.

SEAN: And what made you want to write a book about a mall?

ALEXANDRA: Well, I am a child of the 80s,

<CLIP> Axel Foley synth

ALEXANDRA: So I grew up going to shopping malls. And I actually really see it as an outgrowth of my previous book, which was called The Design of Childhood, which was all about the toys and spaces that shape early childhood. And I realized that the space that shapes adolescence historically has really been the mall.

*<CLIP> MALL CITY: “When you come to the mall with your friends you don’t go shopping or anything, you just records buy records always running around oh look at that cute guy over there oh look at this, you never get time for shopping but its a pretty good time to waste your time here.”*

SEAN: And for all the adolescents out there who maybe don't really have the mall experience at their disposal right now, can you just remind them what the mall glory of your youth maybe looked like?

SCORING FADE IN - Miracle of Love

ALEXANDRA: Well, let's see. My favorite mall growing up was South Square Mall in Durham, North Carolina.

MUSIC BUMP

ALEXANDRA: I loved it because it had the gap it had built in. It had a big food court with an Orange Julius. It had a movie theater. So I could go there and meet friends or just wander around by myself, you know, looking at some books that maybe my mom didn't want me to read, trying to figure out what the joke gifts were, expense or gifts, buying a sweater. It was just a great place to spend a weekend afternoon.

SEAN: And how does that compare, that experience, compare, say, to online shopping? Because that's what we were talking about in the first half of the show. What are the virtues of mall shopping versus e-commerce?

ALEXANDRA: Well, I think the thing about the mall is that it was really a multi-sensory experience, right? You've got your food smells, you have your bath and body work smells. You can touch the sweaters. You can try them on. I mean, what I hear from people about online shopping is that it's become increasingly difficult to know what you're really going to get. And especially for women clothing sizing is really all over the map. So it can just be really frustrating. And wouldn't it be more fun to get one thing that's exactly what you want and maybe also have that be a social event where you can meet people and do it with friends.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: But important to ask here, Alexandra, is how is the mall doing right now? I presume badly.

ALEXANDRA: Yeah, it's really … it's kind of a bifurcated story because some malls are doing really great. I went to Garden State Plaza in New Jersey a couple of weeks ago on a Saturday, and it was packed.  
  
SEAN: Huh!

ALEXANDRA: I saw a lot of families like multigenerational shopping.  
  
SEAN: Hm. You know, there were a lot of people carrying like huge bags from the sporting goods stores, huge bags from the Lego stores. I was there to report a story about teenagers in the mall. So I walked around the food court and kind of went up to groups of teenagers that I saw eating.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
ALEXANDRA: Chick-Fil-A was very popular.

SEAN: What did they have to say about the mall? What did the teens think of the mall in 2023?

ALEXANDRA: They love the mall,

SEAN: Huh!

ALEXANDRA: Yeah.

SEAN: That's great to hear.

*<CLIP> TAYLOR SWIFT: “And say meet me behind the mall.”*  
  
ALEXANDRA: But many other malls are doing badly.

*<CLIP> MALL CLOSING WATERFALL: “After more than 50 years, Eastland Mall will shut it’s doors for good Saturday / Once the crown jewel for retail shopping tonight the Westfield San Francisco Center is pulling the plug on its famed downtown mall / It was once one of the largest malls in the region and one of the most profitable in the country, but that time has come and gone.”*

ALEXANDRA: So it's basically like post 2007 recession malls ran into a real economic headwind for a variety of reasons. And malls have been closing like every year since then. The pandemic accelerated some of those patterns, but basically, like there has been a mass mall die off. And there are a variety of different estimates about how many malls are going to die off over the next 5 to 7 years.

SEAN: Are the malls that are succeeding in 2023 doing anything different from the malls that we might remember from our childhoods?

SCORING IN - A Kiss in Paris

ALEXANDRA: Well, there's definitely an echelon of malls that is succeeding by doing the same thing. Somebody I talked to was talking about King of Prussia Mall,

*<CLIP> BROAD CITY: “A Philadelphia Queen from down the Main Line. King of Prussia Mall.”*

ALEXANDRA: it has, you know, Nordstrom and other high end department stores. It has Williams-Sonoma. It has a really great food court. It's just like those shiniest, sparkly as most deluxe version of the classic mall. However, there are a lot of malls that have lost their department store anchors because a lot of department store companies have filed for bankruptcy, Sears, J.C. Penney.

SCORING FADES OUT

*<CLIP> JC PENNY JINGLE: “JC Penny”*

ALEXANDRA: And so malls that are still successful, that have a failed anchor are the ones that have quickly found something else to go into that location.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
ALEXANDRA: And I think the things I'm seeing the most are either food businesses or entertainment outlets and particularly kind of active family entertainment like trampoline parks.

*<CLIP> WWLP NEWS: “A new attraction will be opening up at the Holyoak Mall. The new Altitude Trampoline Park will be open to the public.”*

ALEXANDRA: Mini golf…

*<CLIP> BROOKS HOLT: “And they have a glow gold here, so we’re going to dive in and check it out. We were just walking around the mall and found this place.”*

ALEXANDRA: … fancy gyms with climbing walls.

*<CLIP> KMSP: “This was an underutilized space at Mall of America / So it was nothing? / It was nothing. So it’s a great location for climb zone.”*

ALEXANDRA: So, you know, things that you can have your kid's birthday party at, things that you can go to in the winter to blow off steam. And then the other thing is kind of a hyper version of the classic food court, which people like to call a food call or a food marketplace where it's more local vendors that have a small outlet there. There might be a market where they sell prepared foods. It's more gourmet because people's tastes have really gone upscale. But it makes food into part of the whole entertainment ethos.

SEAN: Okay. So that's like the positive side of this story. But what about the negative side you're talking about? It sounds like hundreds, if not thousands of miles across the United States dying off. What happens to all that retail space? What happens to all those stores? What happens to all those companies?

ALEXANDRA: Yeah. I mean, it's a really sad story. And if you live in a town where there's a dead mall, I feel like it's one of those things. You don't realize quite how big the mall is until it becomes this void.

*<CLIP> WBNS: “For now the building will remain standing, a reminder of the memories many share.”*

ALEXANDRA: You know, one of the messages I've been trying to get across with my book is that these dead malls can be tremendous opportunities. Like, we're talking a lot about how a lot of cities and suburbs need new housing while the parking lot of the mall is a perfect place to build new housing. A lot of people will say to me, ‘Can't we just, like turn malls into apartments?’ And I'm like, ‘Well, not really.’ I mean, the thing that's good about mall architecture is wide open spaces without barriers.   
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
ALEXANDRA: You know, nicer malls actually do have daylight because they will have a glass roof or an atrium, but they certainly don't have individual windows and they don't have the kind of, you know, plumbing hookups that you need for all the kitchens and bathrooms for apartments. So I really think the wave of the future is going to be building new purpose built housing on the parking lots and then hopefully making the mall into the main street for those new neighborhoods. You know, the the malls would be more successful if they had more of a built in audience. And, you know, hundreds or thousands of people like living around your mall is the kind of built in audience that you need for a supermarket and a liquor store and a dry cleaner and all these other services.

SEAN: Oh, so you're saying the mall could once again become a mall if you build housing around it?

ALEXANDRA: Yup! <laughs>

SEAN: So that actually brings me to a question I wanted to ask you, which is, is anyone out there bold enough to be building *new* malls?

ALEXANDRA: It is happening in Toronto, sort of in the city.  
  
 *DRAKE BUMPER: 6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6!*  
  
ALEXANDRA: They have just built a new mall called the Well. And it's actually this really interesting hybrid of a mall and a Galleria and a shopping street.

*<CLIP> blogTO: “So the project that sunderway here is called The Well and when it’s complete it’s going to be over 3 million square feet in size and basically it’s going to be a community with residential areas, there’s going to be offices and retail areas so let’s go take a look.”*

ALEXANDRA: It has a glass roof over three stories, a retail with a whole marketplace and food hall at the bottom. But the ends of that covered space are open, sort of open to the elements. So it's not all sealed in like a traditional mall, but it does have a roof and it will kind of block the wind and be a warmer environment in winter. And the other important thing about it is it's built, let's say, in an urban environment. And they have built six residential buildings and one office tower over it. So that's the kind of, like, built-in shopper that I was talking about being needed to revive some malls. And they have this huge audience living literally upstairs from the mall.

SEAN: I wonder, you know, in 2023, the year of our Lord, where so many people don't want to leave the house anymore. They want to do everything online. Does it feel like the mall is actually at risk?

ALEXANDRA: I really believe that, you know, whatever the technology is like, however, we can shop now. You know, people are people and people need to be with people.  
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
ALEXANDRA: And that is the kind of activity that the design of the mall has always supported.

SCORING IN - Port of the Call

*<CLIP> MALL CITY: “It is a very sociable place, it's wonderful. You meet good people here, and uh …  
SOME OTHER GUY: … And some bad ones! <laughs>*

ALEXANDRA: So I understand that, you know, people are busier. It's more convenient to buy certain things online. But I don't think ultimately that that's the thing that's going to save the mall. I think the thing that is going to save the mall is people's desire to have a place to go, to have a place to eat with other people, to meet up with friends, etc., etc.. And I just don't really see that as changing. I mean, there's all this reporting now about teenagers being depressed, people being lonelier than ever. And one of the things I think we need to do as a society to combat that is make more places where people can get together and not have them all be hideously expensive. And I think that is a niche that the mall has always filled and can continue to fill into the future.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Alexandra Lange loves the mall. Read all about it in her book, *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall*.   
  
Amina Al-Sadi edited our show today, Patrick Boyd mixed it, Laura Bullard fact checked us and Jon Ehrens produced. Jon loves the mall, even though there aren’t any in Vermont where he lives. Jon’s time with us at *Today, Explained* has come to an end, but if history is any indication he’ll be back. For now, we’ll miss you, Jon.

Happy Giving Tuesday, everybody!