



November 30, 2009

## Shoppers Showed Up, but Spent on Bargains

By [STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM](#)

More consumers flooded the nation's stores on [Thanksgiving](#) weekend in search of bargains. But with retailers dangling rock-bottom prices and consumers only biting at less expensive merchandise like small appliances and winter clothes, the average [amount spent by each shopper declined](#) from last year.

Some 195 million consumers visited stores and Web sites over the weekend, up from 172 million last year, according to the National Retail Federation, the trade group that reported sales results on Sunday afternoon. Average spending over the weekend, however, fell to \$343.31 a person, from \$372.57 a year ago. Total spending was \$41.2 billion — about the same as last year.

“While retailers are encouraged by the number of Americans who shopped over [Black Friday](#) weekend, they know they have their work cut out for them to keep people coming back through Christmas,” Tracy Mullin, president and chief executive of the federation, said in a statement. “Shoppers can continue to expect retailers to focus on low prices and bargains through the end of December.”

One report, from ShopperTrak, a consulting and research firm, showed spending on Friday alone [ticked up 0.5 percent](#) compared with last year, to \$10.66 billion. A more complete picture of the first half of the Christmas season will not emerge until Thursday, when the nation's chains report their November sales.

According to a survey to be published this week by the market research firm NPD Group, deeply discounted, limited quantity merchandise — known as doorbusters — was essential in luring consumers to stores over the weekend.

Most people shopped on Friday because they saw an advertisement for a deal that was too good to pass up or because they feared a chain would run out of an item they wanted, said Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst for the NPD Group, which studied shopping behavior over Thanksgiving weekend. On a quest for value and one-stop shopping, a majority of consumers bought at big discount chains like [Wal-Mart](#), spending \$50 to \$99.99 each.

The good news for retailers was that consumers opened their wallets for some discretionary items, albeit cheap ones. Shoppers not only bought gifts, but also took advantage of low prices to replace old household sundries, like irons, toasters and sheets. The NPD Group found that pent-up demand led some 63.8 percent of consumers to shop for themselves over the weekend.

Consumers began looking for discounts early, with more of them visiting stores this year before dawn. An estimated 31.2 percent of shoppers were at stores by 5 a.m., compared with 23.3 percent who were at stores by that time last year, according to the federation's survey, which was conducted by BIGresearch.

“During a more robust economy, people may be inclined to hit the snooze button on Black Friday,” Phil Rist, executive vice president for strategic initiatives at BIGresearch, said in the federation’s statement, “but high unemployment and a focus on price caused shoppers to visit stores early in anticipation of the best deals.”

The National Retail Federation said shoppers’ destination of choice appeared to be department stores, with almost half of holiday shoppers visiting at least one, a nearly 13 percent increase from last year. Discount retailers were also top choices, attracting some 43.2 percent of shoppers.

As for online sales, [comScore](#), the Internet research company, said retail e-commerce spending for the first 27 days of the holiday season, this year Nov. 1 to 27, [rose 3 percent](#), to \$10.57 billion, compared with the period last year. Online sales on Friday were \$595 million, up 11 percent from last year.

The most popular purchases of the weekend were clothing and books, according to the federation. And many more consumers bought toys, up nearly 13 percent from last year. More shoppers also bought sporting goods, beauty items and gift cards. The NPD Group said its research showed the three hottest categories to be electronics, clothing and movies.

Although the Friday after Thanksgiving is typically a busy day, a big turnout does not necessarily translate into significant profits or indicate how consumers will shop for the rest of the year. Last year, retailers posted the worst sales figures in decades. This year, sales are expected to be about the same as last Christmas.

Retailers forecast more action on Monday, known as Cyber Monday, when they offer alluring deals on their Web sites — the digital equivalent of Black Friday. The National Retail Federation said [the number of consumers who planned to shop online](#) on Monday rose to 96.5 million, up from 85 million last year. Some 87.1 percent of retailers will have a special promotion for the day, up from 83.7 percent last year. And in a change from years past, most consumers say they will shop from home instead of their offices. That is partly because more Americans now have high-speed Internet access at home. But it is also a sign of the times.

“While many companies don’t mind employees shopping online over their lunch hours,” Mr. Rist of BIGresearch said, “high unemployment and concerns over job security may cause more people to shop this Cyber Monday from the comforts of their own home.”

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