

All-night shop-a-thon: Black Friday draws crowds

Bargain shoppers, braving rain or frigid weather, crowded the nation's stores in the wee hours of the night to get their hands on deals from TVs to toys on Black Friday.

Early signs pointed to bigger crowds at many stores including Best Buy, Sears, and Toys R Us for the traditional start to the holiday shopping season.

In an encouraging sign for retailers and for the economy, more shoppers appeared to be buying for themselves than last year, when such indulgences were limited. Lengthened hours that pushed some store openings into Thanksgiving also appeared to pay off.

Toys R Us, which drew in shoppers with 50 percent discounts on such toys as Buzz Lightyear and Barbies, was counting on getting an extra boost by opening 24 hours straight, starting at 10 p.m. on Thanksgiving.

Brian Dunn, CEO of Best Buy Co., which started its holiday TV ads 11 days earlier this year than last year, reported customer counts were showing high single-digit percentage increase Friday morning compared last year. He said shoppers were throwing in items like Blu-ray players to go with early morning bargains that started at 5 a.m.

"Traffic was fast and furious. . We started earlier and we have more TV (commercials). I think both of these things helped," Dunn said in an interview with The Associated Press. "I do think there will be more self-gifting this year."

Still, analysts monitoring stores said many people were paying with cash and were focused, doing plenty of research before venturing out.

"Where there are bargains, there are people looking to gobble them up," said Marshal Cohen, chief analyst for market research firm NPD. "The consumer is still very calculated."

The earlier hours were an enticement to shoppers like Jessica Marshburn, who was armed with a Rockstar energy drink and an advertising insert from a newspaper.

"It's easier this year. I just stayed up," said Marshburn, who was at Washington Square mall in Tigard, Ore., for its midnight opening. Her game plan? Kohl's, Target, and Best Buy, as they opened. She and her friend Cristy Doering were shopping for themselves while keeping their eyes open for deals that might make good gifts.

At the Walmart store in Columbia, Md., customers came in waves, with a big rush at midnight when toys and clothing went on sale and then another surge just before cut-rate electronics were hauled out at 5 a.m. Parking spots were in short supply

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and shopping carts were even more scarce, as people stalked the exits waiting for discarded ones.

The chain averted the dangers of years past by keeping its doors open all night to head off potential stampedes. Shoppers instead lined up for tickets entitling them to heavily discounted TVs and computers and then camped out in cordoned-off aisles.

While the system kept things orderly, some shoppers didn't appreciate it.

Kelly Miller was looking to do some marathon gift shopping, but ended up buying just a few toys, including a \$4 Candyland game.

"I might have picked up more," she said, "if I could have found what I wanted without stepping on people lying on the floor. I got fed up."

Retail analyst Cohen, who had a team of consultants monitoring 11 regions, estimated that 15 percent of purchases so far on Friday were items for the shoppers themselves, up from about 9 percent last year on the same day. On Black Friday 2008, he estimated it dropped to about 5 percent. In good economic times, such purchases run about 26 percent, Cohen said.

Kevin Jones, a Black Friday first-timer, was at Walmart in Columbia, Md., to buy a 42-inch Emerson LCD television for \$398 for his new apartment.

"This year, I'm taking care of me first. I deserve a little gift," he said.

The fierce battle for shoppers' wallets promises savings for those willing and able to buy amid an economy that's still worrying many.

The strong Black Friday builds on retailers' momentum after a solid start to November. Shoppers who can afford it are buying more nonessentials, like jewelry and luxury goods.

Still, nearly 15 million are unemployed, and concerns about job security cloud consumer confidence. Spending may be picking up but has not returned to pre-recession levels.

"It's a dogfight between retail companies," said Chris Donnelly, a senior executive in consulting group Accenture's retail practice. "This year is the first time that there's a little more money in the marketplace so they're being more aggressive about getting the last dollar. At the end of the day, they're going to outweigh people who are pulling back."

Many stores pushed more exclusive deals online Thursday in a bid to rope in shoppers before Black Friday. It apparently worked. According to IBM's Coremetrics, online sales soared 33 percent on the holiday compared with Thanksgiving 2009. The average order was \$182.74, up from \$159.81 on last year's Thanksgiving Day.

Thanksgiving weekend is huge for retailers. In recent years, Black Friday - called

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that because the surge of shoppers could take retailers into profitability, or "the black," for the year - has been the busiest shopping day of the year, according to data from research firm ShopperTrak.

But the retail blitz doesn't make or break the holiday season. In fact, shoppers seem to be procrastinating more every year, giving retailers some nail-biting moments waiting for sales the last few days before Christmas.

Retailers do study buying patterns for the weekend to discern shoppers' mindset. This year, that means taking the measure on their willingness to spend just a little bit more.

Last year, the Thanksgiving shopping weekend accounted for 12.3 percent of overall holiday revenue, according to ShopperTrak. Black Friday made up about half of that.

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