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Holiday retail sales top records

Vendors seek more of same for Cyber Monday

By Jayne O'Donnell
USA TODAY

Retail sales broke records during the Thanksgiving weekend, giving a needed boost to a long-suffering economy and raising retailers' hopes for the best holiday shopping season ever.

This year's sales were up to $52 billion from $45 billion last year, the National Retail Federation said Sunday. A record 226 million shoppers visited stores and websites over Black Friday weekend, up from 212 million last year. The average holiday shopper spent about $400 over the weekend, up from $365 last year.

That augurs well for sales today, which is known as Cyber Monday for all the online promotions. Cyber Monday was the biggest online shopping day of the year in 2010.

Online shopping is increasing in popularity as the Black Friday in-store frenzy reaches unheard-of levels, including incidents of gunfire and pepper spray.

More than half the U.S. adult population — or about 123 million people — plan to shop from the safety of their office or home computer today, the NRF says. Cyber Monday was the biggest online shopping day last year and reached $1 billion, according to Web-tracking company ComScore.

The Monday after Thanksgiving used to be the first day many people had high-speed Internet access when they returned to their offices. Most people who use office computers now have high-speed Internet at home and likely on their mobile devices. But retailers step up the Web-based promotions so much that consumers are now conditioned to keep shopping anyway.

Retailers have tried to figure out "what's the new deal (consumers) just can't pass up for Cyber Monday," says John Squire, chief strategy officer for IBM Smart Commerce, which analyzes the transactions on retail websites.



By Julie Snider, USA TODAY

Many retailers are planning to offer Cyber Monday deals during lunchtime to cater to office-based shoppers, says NRF spokeswoman Ellen Davis, who named the day in 2005. Some are expected to offer 30% off everything, something seldom seen in stores.

"While the Cyber Monday trend began with many people shopping from work, it has evolved into a day where people shop for deals as soon as they get up in the morning and right before they go to bed — and almost every hour in between," Davis says.

Big Black Friday weekends aren't always a sign of consumers' confidence in the economy: The previous top weekend was in the depths of the recession in 2008. But this year's holiday shopping was more of a splurge than a scrounge for cheap necessities.

"Many of the purchases this weekend were for 'self-gifting' and many more discretionary categories than we saw in 2008," Davis says.