Retailers see good signs for holiday

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'People are spending a little more freely'

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American shoppers seem to be ready to spend for the holidays although they want value for their dollar and many have indicated they'll be looking for bargains.

"I've been out for the past two days," Janie Sellers, a Greenville mother of three, said at Walmart on Monday. "I want to know what's here before I begin really shopping on Friday. We're trying to budget our money, but the Christmas is for kids. I'm going to buy them what I can."

With the economy still in the doldrums and unemployment high, the National Retail Federation is predicting an "average" holiday shopping center — with sales increasing 2.8 percent from last year. Wells Fargo economists, though, expect an increase of 5.2 percent over 2010 holiday sales.

Many retailers are optimistic about the season.

"So far, we are ahead of last year," said Bill Gaines, a manager of O.P. Taylor's, a toy store on Main Street. "It's a good sign."

The holiday shopping season should be better than last year's, said Bruce Yandle, dean emeritus of Clemson University's College of Business and Behavioral Science. But "it probably won't be an 'Oh, boy, happy days are here again' season."

"We've been happy with our season so far," said Mary Nase, manager of Mast General Store. "We're well known as a stocking-stuffer

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store. We have so much choice. You can always find something you or someone on your list needs."

Various indicators show Americans are slightly more optimistic, Yandle said, and less fearful of personal financial calamity.

"Retail sales are rising. Savings are going down. People are spending a little more freely," he said. "Fear has subsided to some degree."

Although consumer confidence remains at a relatively low level, Wells Fargo reports it expects consumers' view on the economy to show up early next year rather than over the holidays.

"After the holiday season passes, we look for consumers to dial back spending to roughly a 1.5 percent to 2 percent pace next year," the bank said in a report.

"It's another tough year," said John Bracken, who has two grown sons and four grandchildren. "We've decided that we're going to spend on the kids. But we can't afford that and the adults so I guess we'll send them Christmas cards. It seems the past few years have all been hard."

Small, locally owned stores want to get some of the holiday spending action. American Express and others are sponsoring the day at which shoppers are encouraged to shop locally with small businesses. American Express is offering its cardholders a $25 credit for $25 or more spent at a qualifying small business.

Last year, customers and small-business owners were enthusiastic about the day. Participating small businesses recorded a 28 percent increase in sales over the Saturday after Thanksgiving in 2009. This year more than 2.2 million people have "liked" the Small Business Saturday page on Facebook.

"Small businesses are the foundation of our economy — half of America's workers either own or work for a small business," said Karen Mills, SBA administrator, encouraging Americans to shop locally.

Spending at small businesses during the holiday season is "exceptionally important to small businesses and your local economy," said Frank Knapp, president of the South Carolina Small Business Chamber of Commerce. "Consumers can affect their local economy by deciding where to spend their money."

He pointed to numerous studies that show that spending in local businesses, including locally owned franchises, have three times the impact on a community's economy as spending in national chain stores. And holiday revenues are vital to small businesses, helping them survive until the next holiday season.

Consumers can check www.BuySC.org, an online registry, to find small, locally owned businesses throughout the state, he said. Also, small businesses can register for free.

Online vendors won't be left out of the mix. Many will be offering Black Friday deals as well as special deals on Cyber Monday, the Monday after Thanksgiving.

TD Bank's recently released Holiday Shopping Poll indicates more than half of the respondents plan to spend the same this season, compared to last year. Most said they expect to spend about $670 on gifts.

About 64 percent of those surveyed said they plan to buy gift cards this year. About 28 percent expect to decrease spending, most because of the economy and the need to save. However, 14 percent said they expect their spending to increase.

Marion Talbet, a Greenville County resident, said gift cards are a good solution.

"I don't know what to get anybody so I've decided to go with gift cards and let them pick their own presents. That way I know

they'll be happy," she said.

Shoppers have discovered they don't have to wait until Black Friday, the unofficial start of the holiday shopping season, to find good deals on merchandise. Many stores started their holiday sales in early November.

"Last year, customer response to our 'Black Friday Now' deals was overwhelmingly positive. Many were thrilled that they did not have to wait for holiday deals," said David Friedman, senior vice president and president of marketing for Sears Holdings.

The company began the program at the end of October with special sales every Friday and Saturday until Christmas.

Many retailers, especially national chains, are opening their doors at midnight on Black Friday, and some will be open part of Thanksgiving Day.



Shoppers look for early bargains at Mast General Store in downtown Greenville on Wednesday.
KEN OSBURN/STAFF