Shoppers spread cheer to retailers



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A shopper leaves a Target store with a full cart. Target Corp. said Thursday that more shoppers came to its stores in November and spent more than a year ago.

November's 5.8 percent increase brings best gains in four years

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NEW YORK — Generous discounts lured American to stores and online for holiday gifts in November, providing cheer and delivering the best gains for retailers in four years.

That raises hopes, already buoyed by reports of crowded malls and early numbers, for a strong holiday shopping season and is an encouraging sign for the economic recovery.

The International Council of Shopping Centers' index reported a 5.8 percent gain, much better than the 3 to 4 percent increase expected.

It marked the biggest increase since March when a quirk of the Easter calendar resulted in a 9 percent gain.

Aside from that month, the last time America's retailers reported such a big increase was in September 2006, when it registered 6.2 percent increase.

"All forces came together to yield a performance better than what we've seen in the last four years," said Mike Niemira, chief economist at International Council of Shopping Centers.

November's sales results are being compared with weak spending over the last two years, but Niemira said that plenty of discounting along with what appears to be a sustained recovery is helping to boost consumer spending.

As retailers reported their monthly results Thursday, they showed that many types of shoppers were in the mood to buy — if the product and price were right. Stores reporting gains that topped Wall Street expectations included Costco Wholesale Corp., Target Corp., Victoria's Secret and pricey teen retailer Abercrombie & Fitch.

At the malls and online over the crucial Thanksgiving weekend, many people were not only buying gifts for others but throwing in items for themselves, including high-priced push-up bras and shoes. That's a big difference from the last two Christmases when shoppers were focusing on practical items like coffee pots and socks for others and buying little for themselves.

One of only a handful of disappointments was teen retailer Aeropostale Inc., which announced a management shakeup late Wednesday amid a surprise decline in November.

The results are based on revenue at stores opened at least a year, which are considered a key indicator of a retailer's health.