A tale of two seasons



A last-minute shopper leaves the Toys R Us flagship store in New York's Times Square on Christmas Eve. Black Friday and last-minute shopping were strong. AP

Shopping gets boost in finale

Doldrums between buying binges show many are craving discounts

By Anne D'Innocenzio
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The U.S. holiday shopping season turned out to be two seasons split by a big lull.

A surge in buying in the two weeks before Christmas coupled with a record Black Friday in November gave retailers a solid season. The doldrums between the buying binges show how shoppers have learned to wait for the discounts they know will come.

For Dec. 1-24, spending rose 4.7 percent compared with the same period last year, according to research firm ShopperTrak. In November, it rose 4.1 percent. A 4 percent increase is considered a successful season. A combined figure for the season won't be available until after Dec. 31.

The increase is good news for the economy, because it shows shoppers were willing and able to fund a holiday splurge. Consumer spending, including major items such as health care, accounts for 70 percent of the economy.

Still, plenty of shoppers are pinched for cash in the slow economic recovery, and were seeking the best deals. In the week before Christmas, last-minute shoppers gave retailers a 4.5 percent increase in revenue at stores open at least a year with the same week last year, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers-Goldman Sachs Weekly Chain Store Sales Index.

The index estimates sales at 24 major stores including Macy's and Costco Wholesale Corp. Total retail revenue for the week ended Saturday rose 14.8 percent compared with a year ago.

Gift buyers gained steam as the season went on. "The downs and ups were much more accentuated," said Michael P. Niemira, chief economist at the trade group. "It just shows how cautious the consumer is."