



Mary Ann Sudnick, right, and Terry Estrin of Mariani's Boutique look over their spring merchandise at the Pelham Road store on Wednesday. HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF

By **Angelia Davis**

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Greenville boutique owner Mary Ann Sudnick knew that to have a successful holiday sales season this year, she needed a plan and it needed to be executed early and properly.

That's exactly what the owner of Mariani's Boutique off Pelham Road did. Sudnick described it as "bringing in the right merchandise, at the right time, and at the right price."

"Traffic was up and our shoppers were really in the Christmas spirit," she said. "They bought things in the store for themselves as well as people they had to buy gifts for. People were really in the spending spirit, I think."

Kathy Moca, who co-owns the Greenville-based Beija-Flor jeans company, said the flagship store, Plaza Suite boutique, saw a 100 percent increase in jeans sales during the holiday shopping season and "most of our retailers across the country reported that their sales were up."

That momentum was felt by retailers nationwide beyond Christmas. Sales at stores open at least one year rose 5.3 percent

Upstate shoppers in the SPENDING SPIRIT

during the week that ended Saturday compared with the same period a year ago, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers and Goldman Sachs Weekly Chain Store Sales Index.

Revenue at stores open at least a year rose 1.2 percent for the week ended Saturday compared with the previous week, according to the index.

Increased gift card use, mild weather and a federal holiday on Monday all contributed to the post-Christmas shopping spurt, the index said.

Apparel stores saw the most pickup in customer traffic, the ICSC report said. Mariani's was among the apparel retailers "hit strong" with shoppers that week,

Retailers receive gift of strong holiday sales

64.5

Consumer confidence in December was up from November's 55.2 percent. That's the highest level it has been since April, when the index reached the 66 mark.

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Sudnick said.

She believes consumer confidence had a lot to do with it.

Consumer confidence in December rose to 64.5 from 55.2 in November, according to a monthly index from the New York-based Conference Board. That's the highest level it has been since April when the index reached the 66 mark.

"I think that people have really accepted the fact of where we are as a global economy. There were people that came in to shop and they had budgets. People were consciously looking at prices so it wasn't that there was this *carte blanche* type of thing," Sudnick said. "It was customers that felt confident in their spending because they planned it."

Moca credited the improvement in sales to the company's brand becoming more well-known, to the downtown Greenville location of BeiJa-Flor's flagship store, Plaza Suite, and to the many events that kept "tons of people milling around" in the downtown area.



Costless Outlet business owner Mike Fletcher said his sales started out strong but slowed down in December compared to the previous year. PATRICK COLLARD/STAFF

Terry Sadowski, owner of Plaza Suite at 550 S. Main St., depends a lot on the holiday and tourist traffic downtown, Moca said.

"There's a lot of positive energy going forward for 2012," she said.

As a result of the Christmas-week surge, the index increased its December sales growth estimate to a 4-4.5 percent, The Associated Press reported. Previously the council expected December sales to rise by 3.5-4 percent, AP said.

Major retailers are expected to release their final figures for the month today, but the big concern is how aggressive discounting and other incentives, such as earlier store open-

ings and free shipping, affected merchants' profits, the AP said.

"The concern going into the season was that the profitability wouldn't be as high as a year ago," Mike Niemira, the ICSC's chief economist, told the Associated Press.

Mike Fletcher, owner of Costless Outlet stores in Greenville and Powdersville, said sales at his stores were looking good through Thanksgiving, Black Friday and Small Business Saturday. But his December 2011 sales were much slower than those of December 2010.

He said his own independent research tells him the slowdown was partly

due to "crazy deals" offered by the bigger box stores. Costless Outlet carries everything from "diamonds to dog food and lots of items in between" its website says.

"We are basically a discount store to begin with so we get stuff at a discounted rate and then we mark it down even greater before we sell it. We do that all the time, not just in December or Christmas," he said. "But this year in December, the bigger malls had all kinds of crazy deals. They had things like buy one pair of pants get two free, 75 percent off, and things of that nature."

And, he said, in talking to some retailers at the Haywood Mall and places he walked into just to gauge their thoughts, "they told me the same thing. They said they had done more aggressive promotions this year than they can remember. I think that hurt a small-business guy like myself."

"I think psychologically folks felt like they could get just as good a deal at the bigger shopping centers as they could at my small-business discount store as they have in the past," he said.