Shoppers head back to stores



MARY ALTAFFER / The Associated Press

Shoppers walk past the the Oscar de la Renta display at Saks 5th Avenue's New York store. The luxury retailer reported a 12.7 percent increase in sales for March.

Spring, Easter unlock wallets

Sales up for 4th straight month

By Mae Anderson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Shoppers are finally coming out of hibernation.

Better weather and an earlier Easter enticed Americans to shell out for spring clothes in March, the fourth straight month of gains for retail sales. Target, Macy's, Gap and the parent of Victoria's Secret all beat Wall Street expectations.

The improvement was broad, spanning discounters, mass merchants, specialty stores and luxury retailers. The gains offer strong evidence that people are feeling more confident in the economic recovery and are more willing to spend.

Retailers had several factors on their side. The earlier holiday combined with comparisons to notoriously weak sales in March 2009 had analysts expecting solid improvements. But it's also clear that shoppers' mindset is changing.

"There was a lot of talk about the frugality of the American consumer and that the recession taught people to save more," said Sherif Mityas, a partner in the retail practice at management consultant A.T. Kearney. "But U.S. consumers have short-term memories."

Target Corp., Saks Inc. and Nordstrom Inc. said spring clothes sold well, particularly shoes and women's clothing. Overall, sales in stores open at least a year rose 9 percent in March, based on an index of 31 retailers compiled by the International Council of Shopping Centers.

The gains were partly driven by pent-up demand from shoppers tired of cutting back, said John Long, retail strategist at Kurt Salmon Associates.

"Moms are beginning to shop for themselves, after shopping in their closets the last two years," he said.

Analysts study the

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