

# The Detroit News

## Clicks defeat bricks during Black Friday weekend

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*(Photo: Jose Juarez / Special to The Detroit News)*

Online shoppers outnumbered their brick-and-mortar counterparts during U.S. retailers' pivotal Black Friday weekend, underscoring the challenges facing American malls this holiday season.

More than 103 million people shopped online over the four-day weekend, which started Thursday on Thanksgiving, according to an annual survey commissioned by the National Retail Federation. That compares with fewer than 102 million who ventured into traditional stores, the trade group said.

On Sunday afternoon, however, parking space was sparse at Oakland Mall, and the common mall areas were packed with shoppers.

Jody Wilson of Lake Orion shopped Sunday afternoon at the Troy mall with friend Nicole Laishley, of Waterford.

Both women said Black Friday hype seems to have diminished.

“It didn’t seem that crazy,” Laishley said of her Friday trip to Meijer after she got off work.

Laishley said she tries to avoid Thanksgiving and Black Friday shopping because she feels bad for the employees who have to work.

Wilson said she found Friday’s deals were still available Sunday. She got a holiday light set at Sears for \$27.99 that is normally about \$40.

“I saw a lot of great deals for Black Friday but some of those deals went through the weekend even until Monday,” Wilson said.

While she enjoys shopping at physical stores, online retailers are becoming more attractive.

“I am really starting to like it,” Wilson said. “It is so convenient. It comes right to your door.”

The growth of e-commerce — including people using their smartphones to buy gifts — helped boost the total number of U.S. shoppers to more than 151 million over the weekend.

That figure, which includes people who shopped both online and offline, topped the 136 million that the trade group had predicted.

Other factors, including an earlier roll out of holiday promotions, also are changing consumers’ behavior, NRF President Matthew Shay said in a statement.

The industry is seeing “an evolutionary change in holiday shopping by both consumers and retailers,” Shay said.

Still, it’s difficult to tell if consumers are spending as much as they once did. The average shopper shelled out \$299.60 over the weekend, said the federation, which commissioned Prosper Insights & Analytics to conduct the survey.

But a change in methodology means that figure isn’t comparable to those from prior years. It had been \$380.95 in 2014’s Black Friday weekend and \$407.02 the year before.

Peggy Hayes, a spokeswoman for Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn, said merchants there were happy with the crowds they saw starting Thanksgiving Day. She said JC Penney opened at 3 p.m. Thursday.

“So far the weekend has been going well,” Hayes said. “It’s been steady but no overwhelming.”

“It was a nice kickoff to the holiday season.”

The trade association expects holiday sales to increase 3.7 percent in November and December from a year earlier. That’s a slowdown from last year’s 4.1 percent gain, but above the 2.5 percent average over the past 10 years.

Shay said on a conference call Sunday that the industry should still be able to hit that sales growth target.

“We think we are in a very good place,” he said.

Online retailers have been bombarding customers with email discounts for weeks. Online sales jumped 14.3 percent on Friday over last year, according to Adobe, which tracked activity on 4,500 retail websites. Email promotions drove 25 percent more sales than in 2014, the company said.

That could be bad news for brick and mortar stores because online shoppers are more focused, said Ken Dalto, a Metro Detroit retail analyst.

“They don’t browse,” Dalto said. “There is such a thing as a Christmas impulse shopper. You want to get people in the store.”

Chris Christopher, director of consumer economics at consulting firm IHS, predicts that holiday season e-commerce sales will jump 11.7 percent this year to about \$95 billion, up from last year’s 10.9 percent gain. IHS considers the holiday shopping season to include both November and December.

That’s a much larger increase than the 3.5 percent gain Christopher forecasts for total holiday retail sales, including both online and in traditional retail stores. Overall, about \$1 in every \$7 in holiday shopping sales will occur online this year, IHS predicts.