

Business

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Mall traffic spikes as Christmas nears

By Jaclyn Trop



Lia Christy, left, rings up last-minute purchases made by Tish Zabawski, who bought a watch, a Nintendo Wii game and clothes at the Kohl's department store in Troy. Friday was projected to be the season's third-largest sales day, according to ShopperTrak. (Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News)

Parking lots at many Metro Detroit malls, shopping centers and downtowns were filled to capacity Friday with last-minute shoppers rushing to get more gifts under the tree.

Some stores, such as Pandora, even had their own waiting lists.

"The name goes on a list, and once a sales associate is free, the person on the list is matched up," said Seok Chung, marketing director for The Mall at Partridge Creek, the upscale outdoor mall in Clinton Township.

Traffic at the mall spiked in the afternoon as stores neared closing time, Chung added.



Tracy Green, left, and Marcus Holmes, both of Detroit, do some last-minute Christmas shopping Friday at Twelve Oaks Mall in Novi. Bryan Mitchell / Special to The Detroit News

A strong performance on Friday and today would cap an already record-breaking season for the region's and nation's malls and retailers. The state's retailers expect a 6 percent increase in holiday spending, which is higher than the projected national increase.

The sales activity in Metro Detroit on Friday was heavier than usual this time of year, said Ken Dalto, a retail consultant in Farmington Hills.

The shopping period this year was longer and the deep discounting started before Thanks-

giving, rather than five days before Christmas, Dalto said.

But enduring the crush of last-minute crowds was worthwhile for shoppers seeking deals.

"There were 10 of us coming in at the same time," said Tish Zabawski of Sterling Heights, who wrapped up her shopping at Kohl's in Troy Thursday. "You just got to be more patient and not let the crowds get to you."

Zabawski saved 30 percent — about \$75 — on clothing for her son and a watch for her husband, thanks to the retailer's pre-Christmas promotions.

But local malls also were a draw for consumers who were spending a day with family seeing a movie or eating at a restaurant.

Bravo Cucina Italiana and P.F. Chang's China Bistro were full at Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn on Friday afternoon, said Cathy O'Malley, the center's general manager. Parking lots held steady at 85 percent capacity most of the day, she said.

Friday was projected to be the season's third-largest sales day, according to Chicago-based retail analyst ShopperTrak. The day is also called "Father's Day" "because that's when you're going to see predominantly male shoppers," said ShopperTrak founder Bill Martin.

The week before Christmas can comprise as much as 40 percent of a retailer's overall holiday sales, especially if consumers procrastinated.

"At this point, many shoppers are behind the curve," Martin said Thursday.

The holiday season started strong with Black Friday weekend sales topping a record \$52 billion. Many stores held Black Friday-style promotions throughout December to try to keep up the momentum. Toys R Us held a "Super Sale Saturday" in early December offering scores of dollars-off discounts for playthings. Wal-Mart held a "Cyber Week" sale around Cyber Monday.

The National Retail Federation raised its holiday sales outlook 1 percentage point midway through the season to forecast a rise of 3.8 percent to \$469.1 billion in sales for November and December. Though slower than last year's 5.2 percent gain, the growth would be higher than the 10-year average holiday sales increase of 2.6 percent.

Friday was likely busier at some malls than Christmas Eve since some people leave work earlier, Chung said. But "generally speaking, Christmas Eve shopping patterns are the same: last-minute shoppers and people in a hurry to get to family."

Meijer Inc., however, is bracing for its Christmas rush today.

"We're anticipating a very busy day on Saturday," said spokesman Frank Guglielmi. "Plus the grocery side will be as busy as Thanksgiving."

But last-minute shoppers are less likely to buy gifts for themselves and get their pick of the litter, said retail analyst Marshal Cohen. "Retailers were leaner on key categories this year, so first choice of color, size or model may not be available," Cohen said.

About 43 percent of last-minute shoppers believe the best discounts are found from Dec 21 to Christmas Eve, according to PriceGrabber's holiday shopping survey. Other reasons for waiting until the final week before the holiday include busy schedules (43 percent), procrastination (26 percent), fun (22 percent) and waiting for a year-end work bonus (10 percent).

But the retail season doesn't end with Christmas. Dec. 26, already a top-five day for sales and traffic, is likely to be busier than ever because it falls on a Monday, according to ShopperTrak.

As many as 60 percent more consumers than last year will venture to the stores to return unwanted gifts and shop the post-Christmas promotions, ShopperTrak said. That the day falls on a Monday means stores will have regular shopping hours, and shoppers still on vacation, cooped up at home or enjoying the day off from work will be eager to hit the mall.

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