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Friday, December 23, 2005

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Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News

The Discovery Channel store in Novi's Twelve Oaks Mall touted "Great Stocking Stuffers."

## Retailers push big deals in final Dash for holiday cash 11th-hour shoppers find bargain bonanza

Tenisha Mercer / The Detroit News

Advertisement

Saks Fifth Avenue is holding its after-Christmas sale -- before Christmas.

Meijer is slashing most prices 20 percent.

JCPenney opens at 7 a.m. today and

Saturday, and is plying customers with \$10 coupons on purchases over \$50.

With two shopping days left before Christmas, retailers are gearing up for the furious final stretch of the holiday shopping season.

"This is it," said Christine Gotshaw, an assistant manager at the Discovery Channel store at Twelve Oaks Mall in Novi.

"People have procrastinated and now they're like, 'Oh, my God, Christmas is Sunday.' "

About 1 in 6 men and 1 in 8 women, hadn't begun their holiday gift shopping as of last weekend, according to the National Retail Federation.

The last-minute rush gives retailers one last chance to finish what has been a tough holiday

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season with a bang. "Retailers have got to make their numbers," said Kenneth Dalto, a retail analyst in Farmington Hills. "A bad December could throw the whole year off for them."

As part of its sale, Saks cut prices 40 percent on already reduced merchandise.

"We wanted to capitalize on the traffic coming before the holiday," said Kim Nye, vice president and general manager of the Saks store at the Somerset Collection in Troy.

At Twelve Oaks in Novi on Wednesday, nearly every retailer had sale signs in the window: 50 percent off shirts and sweaters at Johnston & Murphy; 25 percent off at The Body Shop; buy one sweater, get another for 50 percent off at Elisabeth. "It's really starting to build," said mall marketing director Peggy Hayes. "We had wall-to-wall traffic last week."

### Sunday could hurt sales

The big push is especially intense this year because Christmas falls on a Sunday -- a potentially mixed bag for retailers, who could cash in with one more weekend shopping day or suffer if shoppers ditch the mall for Christmas Eve at grandma's.

"Retailers ... are preparing themselves for even more foot traffic this Saturday when even the worst procrastinators will be hitting the stores," said Phil Rist, Vice President of BIGresearch, a market research firm in Ohio.

Nationwide, retail sales for the week ending Dec. 17 rose 2.1 percent compared to the same period in 2004, according to ShopperTrak RCT Corp. in Chicago. But when compared to the previous week, ending Dec. 10, sales were up 16.9 percent.

"Some shoppers may still be waiting to take advantage of late season bargains," said Bill Martin, co-founder of ShopperTrak.

Larry Matthews, 58, of Farmington Hills trekked to Twelve Oaks to finish up the last of his gifts for the season -- a digital camera for his wife and a dress shirt for his son.

"I'm all done," said a relieved Matthews, as he made a beeline for the exit.

Retailers are counting on last minute shoppers like Matthews to jumpstart sluggish holiday sales. A National Retail Federation survey found consumers had completed 54.6 percent of their shopping, up from 46.3 percent

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### Holiday bargains

Retailers are rolling out special deals as part of a last-minute push before Christmas:

Meijer is offering 20 percent off, up to a \$40 discount, on most items.

The Saks Fifth Avenue store at the Somerset Collection in Troy is having a 40 percent off sale on reduced merchandise.

At Twelve Oaks in Novi, 50 percent off shirts and sweaters at Johnston & Murphy; 25 percent off at The Body Shop; and buy one sweater, get one sweater 50 percent off at Elisabeth.

Source: Detroit News research



Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News

At Twelve Oaks Mall in Novi on Wednesday, nearly every retailer had sale signs in the window. "It's really starting to build," says mall marketing director Peggy Hayes. "We had wall-to-wall traffic last week." ▶ See full image

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in 2004.

Books, CDs, toys and clothing were the top sellers among those who were done with their shopping. Holiday sales in November and December are expected to rise 6 percent to \$438.5 billion this year. In Michigan, sales are expected to increase 5 percent, according to forecasts by the Michigan Retailers Association in Lansing.

### Some deals get better

Susanna Muzzin, 48, of Farmington Hills, waited until the last minute to get deals on electronic gadgets for her husband. The window digital thermometer and key ring flashlight he wants weren't marked down at the Discovery Channel at Twelve Oaks, but Muzzin was confident her strategy would pay off.

"The deals are better because merchants know they have to give the best deals now."

Danielle Dlugos, 36, of Livonia, already has completed most of her shopping, but couldn't resist some of the bargains she found at Target last week.

"It's a good idea to wait until the last minute," said Dlugos, as she scouted out more deals at Twelve Oaks. "I'm finding things on sale that normally wouldn't be marked down until after Christmas."

The three days before Christmas made up a big chunk of sales at the JC Penney store at Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn last year. Manager Jan Selles is hoping for similar results this year.

"We have very late customers who traditionally wait until the 11th hour to purchase their gifts," Selles said. "But you still have to be competitive with early hours, late hours and ads to drive business and entice customers."

Meijer Inc., based in Grand Rapids, has aggressively discounted products throughout the season to compete with larger rivals like Wal-Mart Stores Inc.

"I think a lot of people are waiting to the last minute and we want to be the ... place for them," said Meijer spokeswoman Judith Clark.

No standout product this year has also hurt retailers.

"Overall, consumers have just not seen what they wanted this year," said C. Britt Beemer, president of America's Research Group in Charleston, S.C. "There's nothing to get the consumer excited, and the issue is that if consumers don't get excited to buy something nice for themselves, they are going to have a hard time buying for others."

Luxury shoppers are helping to boost what would otherwise be a moribund shopping season. High income shoppers are expected to spend almost double what less affluent customers will spend -- \$1,139.12 compared to \$579.41 this season, according to a survey of 3,780 shoppers at 12 malls by the Macerich Co., a mall operator in Santa Monica, Calif.

Cashmere sweaters and Armani designer clothing are popular sellers at Saks Fifth Avenue's store at Somerset, but luxury shoppers may be cooling their shopping habits.

"Luxury consumers haven't been leading the pack the way they have in the past several season," said Gary Butcher, vice president of marketing and consumer research for the Macerich Co.

"Perhaps upscale shoppers haven't been driven to seek out the season's early bargains that have motivated much of the first wave of holiday shoppers."

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