

# Holiday shopping off to mildly encouraging start

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Holiday shoppers spend a sunny afternoon at Union Square in San Francisco, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009. (AP Photo/Russel A. Daniels)

(AP) -- After shoppers gave retailers a somewhat encouraging start to the holiday shopping season, stores now turn their attention to the online promotions known as Cyber Monday and bringing back customers the rest of the season.

The good news is that [holiday shopping](#) held steady through the Thanksgiving weekend after retailers saw a huge crowd of bargain shoppers for early morning deals Friday.

But economic worries about jobs were still apparent as shoppers mostly stuck to their lists and focused on practical items for themselves and for their loved ones. The big worry is that consumers may not return until

the final hours before Dec. 25.

According to preliminary figures released Saturday by ShopperTrak, a research firm that tracks more than 50,000 outlets, sales rose 0.5 percent to \$10.66 billion Friday, compared with a year ago. That was on top of a 3 percent increase last year.

Online sales Thursday and Friday, however, rose 11 percent to \$913 million, according to data released Sunday by [comScore](#), an Internet research firm. Online business got a big boost as stores pushed online promotions the week leading into the [Thanksgiving](#) weekend.

The National Retail Federation trade group said Sunday it's sticking to its forecast for holiday sales to decline 1 percent from last year.

A year after suffering the biggest sales decline in four decades, the nation's merchants pulled out all the stops in stores and online to keep the momentum going for the holiday weekend, further blurring the lines between their Web-based and land-based businesses.

Major merchants including J.C. Penney Co. and Sears Holdings Corp. broke new ground by making many of their Black Friday specials available on their Web sites at the same time.

The heavy online push could steal some thunder from sales on Cyber Monday, the day when sellers unveil another raft of discounts online to lure shoppers looking in after returning to work.

Marketing gurus have started calling the season a "Twitter Christmas" as merchants have been tweeting deals and previewing discounts on Facebook pages.

Sears tweeted its bargains through the weekend, spokesman Tom Aiello

noted Sunday.

"Forget Black Friday for bricks and Cyber Monday for clicks - this year it's all about making it easy for customers to satisfy their shopping fix ... wherever and whenever," said John Long, a retail strategist at Kurt Salmon Associates.

Long, however, noted that "we're still seeing cautious spending. The pie isn't increasing whether you decide to buy in the stores or online."

Laura Gurski, a partner in the retail practice at A.T. Kearney, a global management consultant, believes the weekend's results offered signals that consumers, many of whom had cut spending all year to bare-bones necessities, had saved up for the holidays and were opening their wallets - even if just a little.

Shoppers' cautious mood was evident.

Allentown, Pa. resident Jamie Sandrock, 27, who was visiting New York City on Saturday and was outside toy store FAO Schwarz, said she got up at 7 a.m. Friday and took advantage of online deals on Amazon.com, American Eagle Outfitters and Sephora.

That's a big change from the Black Fridays of years past, when Sandrock would get up at 3:30 a.m. to head to Target or Best Buy.

"Last year, I was part of the stampede," she said. "This year, I didn't have to shower. I didn't have to get dressed. All I had to do was click."

But Sandrock, who has been trying to find a job in nursing since she graduated from college in May, said she's slashing her [holiday](#) spending to \$350 from last year's \$500.

Michelle Nuanez of Rio Rancho, N.M., who was checking out toys at Target in Albuquerque on Saturday, said she thought about waking up before dawn and heading to Walmart Friday. Then she thought better of it.

"You might save a couple of dollars here or there, but so far I haven't seen anything that's a really good deal as far as toys go," she said.

Nevertheless, reports Sunday from malls and stores were comforting and different from last year when stores had a decent [Black Friday](#) before sales tanked the rest of the season.

The Mall of America in Minneapolis, saw 325,000 visitors Friday and Saturday, the most in 17 years. Spokeswoman Bridget Jewell said traffic remained steady through the weekend and said she's fairly confident that weekend sales will rise from last year.

Taubman Centers, which operates 24 malls, said sales Friday were up anywhere from mid-single digits to double digits compared with a year ago, according to spokeswoman Karen MacDonald. On Saturday, sales were anywhere from unchanged to up slightly.

Shoppers bought about half the items sold for themselves, she said, but the buying was focused on basics like denim, fleece jackets and boots, as well as electronics.

A more complete sales picture won't be known until Thursday, when the nation's retailers report November sales.

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