

Christmas Web sales spike after snowstorm

21 December 2009, By EMILY FREDRIX , AP Retail Writer



In this photo made Monday, Nov. 16, 2009, packages move along a conveyor system to outgoing truck for final shipment inside the 800,000 sq. ft. Amazon.com warehouse, in Goodyear, Ariz. Online retailers have bumped back deadlines and are offering deals on express shipping after weekend snowstorms kept holiday shoppers home in large areas of the East Coast. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin)

(AP) -- Stores in the snow-battered East Coast may have been sparse this weekend, but shoppers kept spending online. Retailers spurred sales with new discounts and shipping offers to make sure gifts arrive by Christmas.

The storm that battered the East Coast, from the Carolinas to New York, may have put at least a \$2 billion dent in "Super Saturday," which usually accounts for \$15 billion worth of sales nationwide, according to weather research firm Planalytics.

Mall traffic was down 10 percent on Saturday, but it surged 65 percent Friday night as more people went out in the storm. Retailers that have must-have items like Toys R Us, Best Buy, and one-stop shops like Walmart are poised to recover the lost sales better than the rest of industry, Planalytics said Monday.

But not all shopping was lost. Many shoppers like

Tina Bashline turned on their computers to whittle down their Christmas lists. She bought gifts for eight people - the bulk of her holiday shopping - from her home in Newtown, Pa., where more than a foot of snow fell.

"You should have seen what I was wearing," she laughed. "My hair was unwashed. I had a big old ugly sweater on, with a credit card in one hand and an address book in the other hand."

She had been deleting e-mail offers of free shipping and other discounts this month, but on Saturday, with more offers pouring in from stores like Barnes & Noble and Staples, the 55-year-old figured she'd give them a chance.

Online retail sales rose 22.4 percent for the weekend compared with last year, Web research company Coremetrics said. On Saturday, sales were up 24.8 percent alone.

The firm also showed the average shopper spending and ordering more on Saturday, when the weather's effects were deepest, than Friday.

Even online sales Monday morning were strong as shoppers raced to make purchases so they could be delivered by Christmas.

"This teaches consumers that maybe those of us that procrastinate, we still have time to go online very close to Christmas," said John Squire, Coremetrics' chief strategy officer.

Retailers were ready to prod those sales along. Amazon.com extended the cutoff for standard shipping by one day through Monday, and free two-day shipping for electronics products. It would not release figures for weekend traffic.

Macy's Web site is offering free shipping through Monday, and J.C. Penney through Tuesday.

Shoppers are busy hunting for last-minute deals. Retail Web traffic peaked at 2.9 million visitors per

minute Saturday night, according to the Akamai Retail Net Usage Index. That was up from 1.9 million on the Saturday before Christmas in 2008, though that day - Dec. 20 - was closer to Christmas than this year.

The Sunday peak was 3.5 million visitors per minute, compared with 2.2 million on the Sunday before Christmas last year.

Monday's numbers were nearing those levels but hadn't peaked by late afternoon.

Now that the storm is largely gone, some bricks-and-mortar stores are extending early morning bargains that had been offered on Saturday through Wednesday. Planalytics said it is seeing stores increasing hours and boosting more promotions to get people shopping.

Les Morris, spokesman at mall operator Simon Property Group, noted the mall operator is thinking of extending hours beyond what was planned for early this week to accommodate customers.

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