

Shoppers haggle for deals from desperate retailers

by LAUREN SHEPHERD
AP Writer

NEW YORK—If you're looking for an extra bargain before the holidays, you may only have to ask. With holiday sales shaping up to be the lowest in years, possibly the worst since the industry began annual comparisons in 1969, retailers say they're taking consumers' demands for good deals seriously. Some are extending return policies, while others are matching competitors' prices. Many are volunteering on-the-spot discounts and even letting customers haggle prices well down from what's marked in a desperate bid to make the cash register ring.

"You'd have to be a moron not to ask for a discount," said Stephen Hoch, a retailing expert at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

More and more consumers are doing just that, treating a trip to the mall like a visit to the used car lot.

Allen Chen, a part-time cashier at a J. Crew store in White Plains, NY, said shoppers with two-month-old receipts are asking for partial refunds for items now on sale. Normally, the store's policy is to refund the difference between an item's purchase price and a later sale price only if it goes on sale within seven days of the purchase.

"When I tell them it is past the seven-day policy, they tell me that they will just return it and re-buy it" at the sale price, he said, adding that his store managers are now allowing customers to do so most of the time.

Shoppers are also being far more savvy than asking retailers to match a competitor's lower price.

While shopping for Blu-ray discs at a Los Angeles Best Buy, Luis Levy used his cell phone to check the price at nearby competitors. Each disc was \$10 cheaper at Circuit City or Wal-Mart. Best Buy matched the lower prices.

Diana Thang, manager of Grace Jewelers near San Francisco's Union Square, said she and her staff are bargaining more than she ever has in two-plus decades in the business. But it's not working wonders.

"They have a budget," Thang said of most customers this season. "We give a low, low price and they still can't accept it. They're looking at more

than \$1,000 stuff, and they want to spend \$200 or \$300."

With sales slow at virtually all retailers, experts say customers now have the upper hand. And even some who don't explicitly ask for a discount or price-match are pressing for better deals.

Jill duPont the owner of a small women's clothing and accessories boutique called Out of the Box in Greenwich, Conn., said she's felt some pressure to mark her prices down to be competitive with others.

"Customers aren't shy about telling us 'what a good price' they found somewhere else," she said.

For some retailers, desperation is setting in. The new year brings new inventory, so retailers typically try to clear out the old stock by year's end. Stores are increasingly willing to do whatever they can to get rid of merchandise—even offering discounts on the spot.

Erica Pearson, a 31-year-old Brooklyn, N.Y., resident, was debating which pair of Camper shoes to buy at a Saga Shoes store in Manhattan when a salesman offered her a deal if she bought both.

"The manager asked me what I wanted to pay for both of them," Pearson said. She wound up getting about \$40 off the total and paying no sales tax.

At cosmetics counters, the situation varies, said Ehtisham Khan, who asked that the major retailer where he works in San Francisco not be named. The biggest-name vendors aren't bargaining; some aren't even offering specials for big spenders. But smaller makeup and perfume companies are piling on the freebies, he said, and it's driving sales.



AP Photo

"You give them an extra travel size or a couple fragrance samples, and they'll buy an extra item rather than wait until later," he said.

Of course, not every retailer is willing to haggle.

Adam Lippes, the owner of a two-store high-end contemporary clothing chain called ADAM, said he's offering bigger sales this year at his location in Manhattan's trendy Meatpacking district to cater to more budget-conscious shoppers. But he has had to retrain his sales staff to explain to shoppers why a garment shouldn't be sold for still less.

"The sales staff has to understand the clothes," he said. "It's more work."

He recently talked a customer out of demanding \$200 off a \$450 dress that was already discounted 25 percent by explaining that it was made with high-quality Italian fabric and manufactured in New York.

Other retailers are giving consumers more wiggle room for returns instead of haggling over prices.

Even Circuit City Inc., which has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, has extended its holiday return deadline to Jan. 31, said spokesman Jim Babb. The chain previously required items like

cameras and computers to be returned by Jan. 8 and others by Jan. 25.

If the International Council of Shopping Centers' prediction for this season's sales comes true, it would be the weakest season since the index of same-store sales started in 1969. The group expects same-store sales, or sales at stores open at least a year, to be down 1 percent in November and December—maybe more—compared with last year.

Even massive discounts on Black Friday—the day after Thanksgiving, historically the point when retailers began to turn a profit—didn't do much to help boost sales.

"Retailers have pulled every single trick out of their quiver of arrows that has worked in the past and what they're seeing this year is that it's just not working," said Hoch, the Wharton expert.

DuPont said her normal return policy "became history" about a month ago after her customers begged to be able to return their normally nonreturnable sale purchases after Christmas.

"We caved in, reluctant to turn away business," she said. "We're not looking forward to what Dec. 26 brings." ■

Hey, Santa: Is that reindeer a he or a she?

Wildlife experts turn their attention to a holiday question

LUBBOCK, Texas—There may be a perfectly good reason why Santa doesn't get lost on his annual Christmas globetrot: His flying reindeer just might be female and don't mind stopping for directions.

The gender of Rudolph and his or her sleigh-hauling friends—the subject of goofy Internet chatter every year around this time—is now being pondered by renowned wildlife experts at Texas A&M University.

"Santa's reindeers were really females, most likely," said Alice Blue-McLendon, a veterinary medicine professor specializing in deer who cites the depictions of Santa's helpers with antlers as the primary evidence. It turns out reindeer grow antlers regardless of gender, and most bulls typically shed their fuzzy protrusions before Christmas.

But Santa's sleigh helpers might also be castrated males, known as steers, said Greg Finstad, who manages the Reindeer Research Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Young steers finish shedding their antlers in February and March, just as non-expecting females do. Bulls generally lose theirs before Christmas, while expectant mothers retain their antlers until calves are birthed in the spring. This allows them to protect food resources through harsh weather and to have enough for developing fetuses, he said.

Sledders most often use steers because they maintain their body condition throughout the winter, he said. Bulls are tucked out from rutting season when they mate with as many as a dozen

females in the months leading up to December. That leaves them depleted and too lean to pull a sleigh or sled through heavy snows, Finstad said.

Many females are pregnant after rutting season, which lasts from summer and into the fall. That would mean long hours of backbreaking work for an expecting Rudolph, as well as Donner, Blitzen, Cupid, Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Comet and Vixen.

"You don't hook up your pregnant females to a sled," Finstad said. "That is not good animal husbandry."

But other aspects of the Christmas story support the all-girl sleigh team theory, Blue-McLendon said.

For example, would a boy reindeer really sport a shiny red nose that almost glows?

"Females like accessories," said Blue-McLendon, who in 2003 led the school's cloning of a white-tailed deer. "I think that fits because females like bling. We like shiny stuff."

As for the reindeer games, forget the rough antler-smashing stuff. Blue-McLendon suggests a female Rudolph would be more up for "games of wit."

And as for the name, Rudolph could certainly still work.

"Why not?" Blue-McLendon said. "I know women named Charlie." (AP)

Winter visits with a vengeance from East to West

by POLLY ANDERSON
AP Writer

THE weather outside was frightful from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Ore., on December 22, with last-minute holiday shoppers shivering and stranded travelers hoping for the best as Christmas rapidly approached.

The little town of Eustis, Maine, got nearly 3 1/2 feet of snow.

In Marysville, Wash., north of Seattle, heavy snow collapsed part of the roof December 22 at the Whitley Evergreen factory, which makes modular buildings.

The 14.5-inch snowfall December 21 in Portland, Maine, surpassed the old record for Dec. 21 of 12.4 inches, set in 1933. On the other side of the country, a total of 11 to 13 inches in Portland, Ore., was the biggest snowfall since January 1980. Depending on how much more fell Monday as the snow trailed off, the storm could rank as one of the city's 10 worst on record.

"It is amazing," said Dave Thompson, spokesman for the Oregon Department of Transportation. "You say to yourself: 'That's Portland?' The roads are snowpacked, covered with ice and it's freezing rain."

"This is the worst Christmas I have ever seen in 33 years," Osgood said. "The good news here is for shoppers. If they can get out, they'll get amazing bargains."

Temperatures in Chicago—hard hit over the weekend with subzero readings as winter officially began—were up to the single digits December 22.

Snowfall was relatively scant in

the Midwest and East, but high winds whipped up snow along roadways and, along with ice, made driving hazardous for holiday travelers.

In western New York, a 134-mile stretch of the state Thruway between Rochester and Pennsylvania was closed for six hours overnight because of blowing snow. In Pittsburgh, schools were initially to open two hours late but were closed for the day instead because of below-zero wind chills.

For the mid-Atlantic states, the storm took the form of weekend snow and rain—followed by a cold snap early December 22. High winds overnight cut off power to 13,000 homes and businesses in Maryland. Baltimore Gas & Electric said on its Web site that all but 1,200 had service restored by midafternoon.

The big snowfall in Maine was the result of a nor'easter. Before the storm even arrived, the National Weather Service issued a rare blizzard warning for eastern and northern Maine. Brooklin, on the coast, recorded a gust of 59 mph.

The town of Eustis in western Maine received a whopping 41.8 inches of snow by the morning of December 22. Eric Schwibs from the National Weather Service called it "the sweet spot of the storm."

In New Hampshire, the deep snow added to the misery for nearly 11,000 customers still in the dark from an ice storm more than a week earlier.

Nearly 40,000 customers remain without power across

northern Indiana because of an ice storm last week. There were also more than 7,000 customers still out in Illinois on December 22 and about 5,000 in northwest Ohio.

The weather was blamed for at least 11 deaths over the weekend, including a collision between a car and a semitrailer truck near New Carlisle, Ind., that killed four Marines based near Detroit. In suburban Chicago, the frozen body of a 48-year-old mother of three was found on a sidewalk near her home; an autopsy showed she died of hypothermia.

In the Seattle area, the city remained largely snowbound December 22.

There were long, snaking lines at virtually every ticket counter at the airport December 22 morning. Some travelers said they had spent 12 hours waiting for a ticket agent, taking turns sleeping while others held their places in line. The baggage claim area was littered with mounds of unclaimed luggage 6 and 7 feet high.

Hundreds of travelers were marooned even in Los Angeles, where the line to rebook Alaska Airlines flights to the Pacific Northwest stretched out the door.

But some people were able to take advantage of the storm.

Toting a snow shovel as he stopped for coffee early December 22 in Seattle, Ralph Goldman, said he and two fellow handymen were going from business to business offering to shovel snow and finding no end of takers.

"It's good. I can't complain," Goldman said. "I wanted the snow so much. It keeps me happy." ■

Economy slows population growth in South, West

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from 2007 to 2008, more people left Florida for other states than moved in—a net loss of nearly 9,300 people. The state still gained population from births and foreign immigration, but growth was slower than in previous years.

From 2007 to 2008, California had the biggest net loss of people moving to other states—more than 144,000 people. It was followed by New York, Michigan, New Jersey and Illinois.

The states that attracted the most people from other states during the period were Texas, North Carolina, Arizona, Georgia and South Carolina.

The population shifts will be felt following the 2010 census, when the nation apportions the 435 seats in the House of Repre-

sentatives, based on population. Seats in Congress also determine the number of electoral votes states have in presidential elections.

Texas stands to be the biggest winner, picking up as many as four seats, while Ohio could be the big loser, giving up as many as two seats, according to projections by Kim Brace of Election Data Services, a Virginia-based firm that crunches political numbers.

Other states projected to lose single seats are Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania. Brace projects Arizona to add two seats, while Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina and Utah could add one each. Florida could add one or two seats, Brace said.

Numerous other House seats are in play, depending on whether the nation's economic problems continue to affect population trends. As many as 13 states could gain or lose seats, depending on population trends over the next two years and the accuracy of the 2010 census, Brace said.

California illustrates the importance of an accurate head count. The Census Bureau estimates California has fewer than 37 million people, putting it in danger of losing a House seat. State demographers, however, put the population at more than 38 million, taking the seat out of play.

"If I was somebody in charge of one of the states sitting on the edge, I would be thinking about how I could improve the census in my state, because it does have an impact," Brace said. ■

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