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GREENWICH TIME (Greenwich, Conn.)

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Analysts: Thanksgiving openings reflect consumer demand

By Hugh Bailey



Shoppers pass by a store's sign saying it will be open on Thanksgiving Day at Westfield's Connecticut Post Mall in Milford, Conn., on Wednesday Nov. 19, 2014. Some shoppers have expressed displeasure at the idea of stores and malls being open on a holiday which was when stores traditionally closed. Photo: Christian Abraham

Black Friday might soon be a thing of the past.

With day-after-Thanksgiving sales starting ever earlier in the morning in recent years, they have now broken through the holiday wall completely, with many big-name retailers opening Thursday afternoon or earlier.

Kmart, for one, plans to open at 6 a.m. on Thanksgiving. Many others will open in the afternoon, while some are staying closed for the holiday.

Experts say stores are responding to demand. "You have to keep in mind: Retailers won't do anything unless they believe that consumers will respond positively to it," said [Tim Phelan](#), president of the [Connecticut Retail Merchants Association](#). "There are some consumers who want to shop on Thanksgiving night."

Phelan was among many analysts optimistic the state will follow national estimates of a 4.1 percent increase over last year's holiday season retail sales. Lower prices for home heating oil and gasoline are leaving people with more to spend, he said.

Phelan also noted the stock market's strong recent performance. "That always has a positive impact, particularly on Connecticut and Fairfield County," he said. "There is a general feeling out there that the worst of the recession is behind us and people want to move forward."

Early opening

Though some customers like it, the idea of opening Thanksgiving night doesn't appeal to everyone.

Milford's [Connecticut Post](#) mall ran into controversy this month over a memo from mall management that said all businesses must open at 6 p.m. on Thanksgiving, which provoked a social-media backlash.

In response, mall management released a statement: "We appreciate the various points of view on how families choose to celebrate Thanksgiving and other holiday traditions, and our opening hours are there to support the growing enthusiasm from customers and families who appreciate the extended holiday shopping and see it as an enjoyable end to their day with family and friends."

Phelan said the demand for an early opening depends on the type of store. "For some retailers, Black Friday isn't a big day for you," he said. "If you sell men's clothing, you're probably not going to have a big Black Friday, but if you're a department store, it's a big day."

The Danbury Fair mall also plans to give people a head start. While the mall will open its doors at 8 p.m., it will allow shoppers to get into stores as early as 6 p.m.

[Melissa Eigen](#), marketing manager at the Danbury Fair mall, said early indications are positive.

"We are anticipating a positive holiday season this year," she said. "Our industry is forecasting a season of healthy increases helped along by lower gas prices that are putting more money into consumer's pockets."

She said the Thanksgiving Day opening reflects demand.

"Retailers know what their shoppers want, and some wanted an earlier start to the Black Friday experience," she said.

Malls in Trumbull and Stamford will also open Thanksgiving night.

"Our holiday mall hours reflect the demand of the consumer, the competitive landscape and the desire of our retailers to be open," said [Stamford Town Center](#) general manager [Meredith Keeler](#).

Local stores

In Greenwich, where local stores are more the norm, there won't be much action on Thanksgiving Day, according to [Greenwich Chamber of Commerce](#) Executive Director [Marcia O'Kane](#).

"Most stores really want to give their workers a day off to spend with their families and get them rested for anticipating one of the biggest shopping days of the year on Friday," O'Kane said. "Most everyone here appreciates their workers and wants to give them the day off."

With most stores on Greenwich Avenue closing around the time the sun sets on a typical weekday, evening shopping isn't a huge market in town. "This trend is mostly those big box stores that are competing with each other for the mass audience of shoppers," O'Kane said.

"They can be so competitive, and they want to be the first one to open so they can beat their competition."

O'Kane said Black Friday has a different atmosphere in town. "There are sales and incentives, but it's not crazy the way it is other places," she said. "It's wonderful and festive."

Changing patterns

Whether it's Thursday or Friday, consumers can expect to see some discounts.

According to WalletHub, a personal finance website, of the country's largest retailers, JCPenney will have the highest percentage of discounted items, at 65 percent, followed by Macy's, at 54 percent, and Rite-Aid, at 53 percent. Costco has the lowest, at 21 percent.

Jewelry is the most frequently discounted category; electronics and computers the least.

[Joseph Matthews](#), first vice president and branch manager for [Morgan Stanley](#) in Fairfield, said customers will decide how the earlier Thanksgiving openings are received.

"Ultimately, this is about servicing the consumer, and apparently there's an appetite for those openings," he said. "Consumers' purchasing patterns are shifting, and everyone is trying to get ahead."

Matthews said there are signs more people will shop online the Monday after Thanksgiving weekend, which retailers have come to call "Cyber Monday," than Black Friday.

"Consumers are going to spend their money somehow," he said. "So stores are trying to differentiate, offer something new and shiny to capture consumers' attention. By opening earlier, they hope to capture the consumer dollar before it's spent somewhere else," he said.

Matthews said he agrees with forecasts that show improved holiday sales.

"It's looking very good," he said. "There are a number of different metrics pointing in right direction."

Staff writers [Dirk Perrefort](#) and [Maggie Gordon](#) contributed to this report.