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Area retailers gear up for holiday shopping season



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By **Luther Turmelle**

For consumers, the one-month period between Thanksgiving and Christmas is simply known as “the holiday season.”

But for retailers, the season is make-it-or-break-it time. It’s a period that often decides whether the business will survive to see another holiday season.

Over the past 10 years, the National Retail Federation says holiday sales have increased an average of 2.5 percent. And for this year, the trade group is predicting retail sales will increase by 2.5 percent over last year’s numbers to \$630.5 billion, a figure that is expected to represent about 19 percent of the entire retail industry’s sales for all of this year.

Other economic experts are less confident it will be that robust.

“Consumers are not going to spend at the same pace that they did in previous years,” said Joe Matthews, a first vice president with Morgan Stanley, who is based in Fairfield. “They are going to be spending at a pace that that’s equal to real wage growth. They’re not going to be using high-interest credit cards or tapping into their home equity like it’s their own personal ATM machine.”

Matthews said that while he doesn’t see consumers spending as much as in previous holiday seasons, he is expecting sales by online retailers to increase. Sales of online retailers in the third quarter increased by 57 percent, he said, while brick-and-mortar businesses saw sales decline by 13 percent.

In an effort try and negate some of the momentum that online retailers have, David Cadden, a professor emeritus at Quinnipiac University’s School of Business, said large retailers and those based in malls “are going to glitz up their experience so that people don’t sit home in their pajamas and shop.”

To that end, mall operator Westfield Properties will have individuals it calls Merry Makers roaming around its retail centers, offering to pay for meals for random shoppers as well pick up the tab for some of their purchases, said Danielle Consiglio, marketing manager at the chain’s Connecticut Post mall in Milford. In addition to the Connecticut Post, Westfield Properties operates retail centers in Meriden and Trumbull.

The chain’s Merry Makers will be on the prowl at the Westfield Malls between Saturday and Monday, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. each day. This is the third year in a row that Westfield is has used the Merry Makers concept, said Myf Ryan, Westfield’s chief marketing officer.

Westfield’s malls, as well as Tanger Outlets locations in Westbrook and at Foxwoods Casino, open at 6 p.m. on Thanksgiving and stay open through 10 p.m. on Black Friday. That’s also the case at Clinton Crossing Premium Outlets on the Shoreline.

But there has been a subtle shift in retailers’ attitudes toward being open on Thanksgiving after several in which a growing number of stores were open on the holiday, said David Cadden, a professor emeritus at Quinnipiac University’s School of Business.

“It’s not so much to address the concerns of consumers,” Cadden said. “It has more to do with building good will among employees, because I think there has been a great deal of turnover among retail workers as a result of this.”

Seattle-based retailer REI has not only rejected opening on Thanksgiving, but is also paying it workers to take off Black Friday, as well. The day after Thanksgiving is typically one of the biggest single days annually in terms of retail sales.

REI has built a [social media campaign, #OptOutside](#), around the concept, encouraging its workers and consumers to spend Black Friday outside. Over one million people have signed up on REI’s website, pledging to spend Friday outside.

REI has 143 stores, including Connecticut locations in Norwalk and West Hartford.

The retailing focus on Saturday turns toward small businesses. That's when [Small Business Saturday](#), a marketing concept launched by American Express in 2010, takes center stage.

Cadden doesn't believe the average consumer is aware of Small Business Saturday. But he said the concept works best in town centers, where a large number of retailers are members of a merchants association, and can leverage their marketing dollars to promote Small Business Saturday sales and activities.

One such group, Main Street New London, has been doing that kind of promotion for about four years, said Anna Perch, the group's executive director. This year's event includes a free holiday concert, caroling and a Christmas tree lighting at 5 p.m. Saturday.

About 25 retailers in downtown New London are participating this year, Perch said.

"The merchants participate because we have a lot of avenues of promotion that we don't have access to," she said. "And it allows to tell consumers that stores downtown have a lot of gifts that you can't find in malls or at large retailers."

Closer to New Haven, [the Downtown Milford Business Association](#) launches a month-long celebrations of the city's small businesses on Saturday.

The organization's primary holiday event, the Lamplight Stoll, will be held Dec. 4. The event features roving carolers and other entertainers as well as special discounts from participating merchants.