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The Christmas shopping rush is on

By Todd Jensen
 Emerald Contributor

Take note, shoppers. Only 19 days left until Christmas. Since the first week in November, local retailers have bolstered their advertising budgets and decked their aisles in holiday splendor, all in anticipation of the holiday shopping crowds.

And the crowds are coming. Retailers typically see at least a third of their annual business during the lucrative fourth quarter of the year. The year's best business, in fact, generally occurs in the four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas when sales often account for 20 percent of annual totals.

Retailers are especially optimistic this year, as Christmas falls on a Monday, leaving the Saturday and Sunday before Christmas wide open for last minute shoppers.

Many believe the biggest shopping day of the year is the Friday or Saturday following Thanksgiving. However, according to Jerry Swan, the

manager of the Montgomery Ward store at Valley River Center, the biggest shopping day of the year is actually the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Local retailers plan it that way, with heavily advertised special events.

Once again this year, Valley River Center staged a major shopping event on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Shoppers were invited to stay from 9 a.m. until midnight, celebrate the arrival of Santa Claus and participate in live television coverage.

Although analysts expect retail sales to be as brisk as ever this year, retailers still face many challenges. Christmas shoppers this year seem to expect discounts, and retailers are obliging. Sears is faced with disappointing November sales, and will likely resort to additional discounting in order to attract customers. This will have industry-wide effects as retailers cut prices to compete with one another. The winner in this battle: you.

A quick glance at local pa-

pers or your mailbox demonstrates the willingness of local retailers to cut prices in order to gain business. A relative newcomer on the Eugene shopping circuit, Shopko, stresses its policy of "underpricing" in local advertisements. Fred Meyer is fighting back by saying it won't be undersold. Can everyone in town really have the lowest price around? Maybe, this year.

As if store managers don't have enough to worry about already, it turns out that people's shopping habits are influenced by a number of uncontrollable factors, among which is weather. Cool weather, and especially cold and drab weekends, tend to bring shoppers out in droves. Warm days during the first three weeks of November disappointed local and national retailers, but a reprieve came over the Thanksgiving weekend in the form of cool, damp weather.

Santa's shopping list this year seems to be dominated by clothes, shoes, perfumes, and of course, toys. Herb Heier, a general merchandising manager at Valley River's J.C. Penney, has noticed that leather jackets are selling like hotcakes this year.

On the national level, J.C. Penney's sales for November are 7.4 percent better than last year. Wal-Mart, a discount chain, posted an incredible 27 percent increase, adding strength to the argument that shoppers favor discounts this year.

Best-selling toys for Christmas 1989 are essentially a repeat of Christmas 1988: Nintendo video games, Micro Machines, and Barbie dolls. When asked what was hot this year in toys, Shannon Shafer, a local toy store manager immediately answered "the turtle stuff," referring to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

For the sport fan in your life, a Ref-A-Ree doll may be the perfect gift. It can be ripped apart limb by limb when the real referee on television makes that unjust call. One catch: you'll have to go to Bloomingdale's in New York to get one.

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