

Frivolous fashions

Retailers embellish old trends to lure consumers, with luxury stores expected to garner the biggest sales

BY ANNE D'INNOCENZIO
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — The nation's retailers are hoping furry ponchos, fur-lined flip-flops and sweater sets adorned with multiple brooches will excite shoppers this holiday season and lure them into stores and malls earlier than in previous years.

Some of the merchandise is down-right silly, but store owners hope all the frivolity will help them improve on last year's 4 percent increase in sales at stores opened at least a year, which was the biggest gain since 1999 when retailers posted a 5.4 percent increase.

"Many of these trends are not new but will be hotter because they have a lot more pizzazz," said David Wolfe, creative director for the Doner Group, a New York-based merchandise buying office. "I don't think this is going to be the most tasteful Christmas, but it could be the most fun. And it's selling."

At J.C. Penney Co. Inc., hot holiday items include lab-made pink sapphire rings, rabbit-fur ponchos and hot pink leather gloves. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. is selling hot pink puffy suede boots and sweaters with faux-fur trims, and after having success with brooches this past fall, Sears, Roebuck and Co. is featuring two or three of these ornate pins on sweaters and capes.

At luxury store Bergdorf Goodman, owned by the Neiman-Marcus Group Inc., \$1,480 mink handbags with dragon embellishments have been big hits with shoppers, as have \$2,200 body-hugging wraps in faux leopard print, vice president of fashion Robert Burke said.

As the holiday 2004 shopping season kicks into gear amid an improving but still challenging economy, many merchants are trying to be more creative to get consumers to buy in yet another season that hasn't yielded any particular must-haves besides miniature iPods from Apple Computer Inc. and flat-screen television sets.

The mood of most retailers has improved in recent weeks as falling fuel prices and strong job gains revived consumer spending momentum that slowed in the summer.

Most consumer surveys on spending indicate that shoppers' intentions are similar to a year ago. The Conference Board, a New York-based research firm, said its survey suggests U.S. households will spend an average of \$476 on gifts this season, up from \$455 a year ago. A separate survey conducted by The Gallup Organization found that shoppers plan to spend \$730, down slightly from \$734 a year ago.

Still, as Michael P. Niemira, chief

economist at the International Council of Shopping Centers, puts it: "The conditions are right for a pretty good Christmas." He predicts same-store sales increases of 3 to 4 percent for the holiday period.

The Washington, D.C.-based National Retail Federation projects that total sales, after restaurant and auto sales are excluded, will increase 4.5 percent for the November-December period. That would be less than the 5.1 percent gain of a year earlier.

Analysts expect that luxury stores will do the best. Discounters are expected to see their gains muted because of the high gasoline prices. Mall-based apparel stores will probably have a mixed bag of results. Teen retailers like American Eagle Outfitters Inc. are expected to do well, fueled by preppy looks, while women's apparel chains such as Talbots Inc. could suffer.

With a strong sales streak behind it, Bergdorf Goodman feels confident that its more lavish offerings will win over customers. "Our consumer is looking for unique products. The more unique and the more special, the more attracted they are," Burke said.

Still, even retailers know that throwing all those brooches, fur trims and other embellishments on the selling floor can confuse consumers, turning them into fashion victims. "You have to be careful not to add too much or it can be over the top," said Lee Antonio, a Sears spokeswoman.

Pricey partridges

According to a Pittsburgh-based bank, items in "The Twelve Days of Christmas" exceed \$66,000

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PITTSBURGH — Forget the partridge in a pear tree. How about a new Jaguar, a BMW 7 Series, a Mercedes-Benz or a 1949 Rolex?

The vintage watch and luxury cars would cost as much as all the gifts listed in the yuletide classic "The Twelve Days of Christmas," according to PNC Financial Services Group Inc.

Each year, the Pittsburgh-based bank does a tongue-in-cheek tally of how much the drummers drumming, pipers piping, turtle doves and golden rings would set you back if you bought them for your true love at today's prices.

The bank began publishing the list in 1982 for institutional clients and released it to the public the next year.

So what are all the gifts going for this year? If they were bought repeatedly on each day as the song suggests, they'd hit \$66,334, up from \$65,264 last year.

Buying each item just once would cost \$17,279. That's still enough for a Mini Cooper, a ride in a Russian MiG jet fighter, a 10-acre ranch in Colorado or a 1920s baseball signed by Babe Ruth.

The nine ladies dancing would leave the largest dent in your wallet this year, coming in at \$4,400. The eight maids-a-milking are a

bargain at \$41.20.

Outsourcing, alas, factors into the equation.

"As a result, the cost of skilled dancers has steadily increased, while the unskilled milk maids haven't managed an increase in pay for many years," said Jeff Kleintop, chief investment strategist for PNC Advisors.

The prices for the birds — swans, geese, canaries (calling birds), hens, doves and partridges — didn't change much from last year, coming in at \$4,201, compared with \$4,138, according to the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens.

But with the declining dollar, you would have saved buying the three French hens last year, when they were \$15, compared with \$45 this year.

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