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U.S. retailers see encouraging increases in Black Friday numbers

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According to the National Retail Federation's Black Friday Weekend survey, which includes spending data for Thursday, Friday and Saturday and estimates for Sunday, about 172 million shoppers visited stores and websites over the weekend, versus 147 million last year.

On average, shoppers spent \$372.57 per person over the weekend, up 7.2% from last year's average of \$347.55. BIGresearch, which conducted the survey of 3,370 shoppers, estimates that total spending during the weekend reached \$41 billion. The survey found that 23.3% of shoppers were at the stores by 5 a.m. and 57.6% were walking the aisles by 9 a.m.

ShopperTrak RCT offered a more modest but still encouraging Black Friday report. That report said retail sales increased 3% over last year and that sales on Friday alone totaled \$10.6 billion. The south saw the biggest gain in foot traffic of any region, with a 3.4% rise over 2007, followed by the midwest (3%), the west (2.7%) and the northeast (2.6%).

Business at a sampling of stores at Taubman Centers malls, meanwhile, was "about even to up mid-single digits," between Black Friday last year and this year, according to a company spokesman. On Saturday business at the same stores was unchanged to slightly below average.

The NRF survey said shoppers kept shopping all weekend. About 74 million shopped on Black Friday. Some 57 million people were out on Saturday, up from 48.3 million last year, while 26.2 million planned to shop on Sunday. The NRF expects sales to rise 2.2% this holiday season, to \$470.4 billion.

Aggressive discounting was behind much of this activity, which some observers say could have a stifling effect on margins for many retailers. An ICSC poll conducted just before Black Friday revealed that 81% of consumers who planned to shop over the weekend said they were heading to a discount store, with 78% citing department stores and 63% going to electronics stores.

"These results are somewhat surprising on many fronts," said Michael Niemira, ICSC's chief economist and director of research. "The percentage of shoppers who plan to take advantage of those holiday bargains rose appreciably from the prior year-45%, versus 36% in 2007-and, secondly, so too did the share of consumers who will be shopping for themselves â€" 81 percent, versus 69% in 2007. These results further underscore how pent-up demand can be triggered by the right set of promotions and events, but also how some potentially strong sales days can co-exist with a weak underlying sales trend."

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