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# State, national forecasters expect a bigger-spending holiday season

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Experts who track holiday spending are sounding an upbeat tune as Black Friday beckons, predicting that people will spend more money on gifts this season than they have in the last few years.

"We are certainly optimistic about the shopping season, much more so than last year," said Bill Rennie, vice president of the [Retailers Association of Massachusetts](#).

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Meanwhile, some local shopkeepers say the Black Friday concept is really the domain of larger stores.

"I think the craziness of Black Friday happens mostly in big box land," said Bucky Sparkle, co-owner of Inspirit Common, a shop on Main Street in Northampton. "It's not a particularly heavy day for us until later on."

Rennie said consumers have focused on saving the past few years, making practical purchases as gifts.

"This year we expect a bit more of a splurge in spending - gifts that you can have fun with," he said.

Whether that will translate to local Main Street businesses remains to be seen, but many retailers here are expressing cautious optimism as the holiday season gears up.

At the Artisan Gallery in downtown Northampton, owner Patty Arbour said she feels confident about sales this year, based on a strong start and what feels like an attitude change among customers. Arbour said customers seem more calm and less uncertain about the economy, although she cautions it's way too early to predict how sales will end up.

"People are happy to be shopping, it seems," she said.

Other business leaders shared similar thoughts.

"I think people are excited to spend a little money and get things they really love for the people they love," said Jessica Neiswender, manager at Inspirit Common in Northampton.

Downtown Sounds owner Joseph Blumenthal said this year is looking marginally better than last, although the climate in general is far from great. He's hopeful this season might

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4



CAROL LOLLIS

Brenda Boyle of Westhampton chats with Haley White of Easthampton, left, and Tammy White at Bag Day in Northampton Saturday afternoon. Northampton's holiday season starts about a week before Black Friday, the traditional start to the shopping season.

kick-start a resurgence in the next two to three years, as people who have clamped down on spending begin to loosen their wallets and purses.

That's exactly what experts predict will happen, at least for this year. The National Retail Federation is forecasting a 2.3 percent boost, to \$447.1 billion, in holiday retail sales for this season compared to last. The change reflects a stronger economy and greater consumer confidence, the Washington organization said.

The outlook is even better in Massachusetts, where sales are predicted to jump by 4.3 percent this year. If that happens, it would be the first year since 2006 that local holiday sales have increased over the prior season, according to the Retailers Association of Massachusetts.

The association's prediction is based on a survey of the group's 3,200 members. Rennie said the prediction likely translates well to small retailers - a staple in the Valley - because a majority of the members surveyed are small business owners.

"The small retailers are often much closer to their customers," he said.

Jon B. Hurst, the association's president, said the numbers are encouraging, but 2010 will continue to present competitive and profitability challenges for businesses.

"Consumers will continue to enjoy an environment of extensive promotions and value due to slow economic growth and a multitude of shopping options," Hurst said in a press release.

### **Black November?**

Not only are people likely to spend more this holiday season, but many already have. So much so that Black Friday - the traditional start of the holiday season on the day after Thanksgiving, and once the top shopping day of the year - is losing some of its power in favor of a multi-week phenomenon some have dubbed Black November.

"Each year it gets a little earlier," Rennie said. "Black Friday really has become such a big event and competition has spurred a little extra early deals."

Some experts now say that Black Friday actually marks the halfway point of holiday shopping. Retailers, in fact, view the entire months of November and December as the holiday shopping season.

Holiday promotions are coming before, during and after Black Friday, with frequency being more important than the size of the discounts. Among the retail promotions being rolled out this season are "flash sale" email alerts and expanded free shipping offers.

Online shopping has also gained enough of a foothold in the minds of consumers that it now has its own version of Black Friday, called Cyber Monday, for the Monday after Thanksgiving.

There are also indications based on consumer surveys and recent sales that shoppers will be more open to purchases viewed as more fun and discretionary this year, as opposed to the last two years, which featured far more necessities.

To meet the demand, retailers are boosting their inventory, beefing up holiday staffing and coupling social media sites like Facebook and Twitter with traditional advertising methods.

Northampton's holiday season actually starts about a week before Black Friday, when city shops participate in Bag Day, a promotion that gives shoppers 20 percent off any single item. Bag Day this year occurred Saturday.

"Bag day really kicks off the holiday shopping," said Lora Fischer, a buyer for Faces.

Blumenthal and others concur that the heavy shopping usually starts on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, and builds momentum until the week before Christmas.

Retailers, like shoppers, seem upbeat as the holidays approach.

"You can feel the Christmas rush building - I love it," said Moira St. Amand, who works at Faces.

**Kira Choate, a Gazette contributing writer, contributed to this story. Chad Cain can be reached at [ccain@gazettenet.com](mailto:ccain@gazettenet.com).**

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