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Some shoppers go crazy; others keep it simple

By Lorrie Grant and Theresa Howard, USA TODAY

Gretchen Deaton whisked through KB Toys to buy gifts for her sons and then headed to the next store in hopes of crossing off more names from her list.



Yerlika Montoya, left, waits with other shoppers Friday at a toy store in Aventura Mall in Aventura, Fla.

By Nuri Vallbona, AP/Miami Herald

"There were a couple of things that were a good deal," says Deaton, who ventured out for her first pre-dawn shopping event at Cary (N.C.) Towne Center mall on Friday, the day after Thanksgiving that traditionally kicks off the holiday shopping season.

She was among millions nationwide armed with circulars and chasing deals over the weekend.

An early read shows sales tallied a healthy \$27.8 billion over the weekend, an average of \$302.81 per shopper, according to the National Retail Federation's survey of merchants. That's a 22% advance from the same weekend a year ago, but it also came in response to more aggressive retailer promotions this year. That could mean consumers were out as much for bargains as spending sprees.

Several of those out shopping indicated that because of the nation's many sobering events this year they're just in a different mood.

"We're not going crazy this year. I could have bought more toys, but our kids have enough things," Deaton of Apex, N.C., says of Jack, 3, and Henry, 1.

Among influences shoppers cited — whether they've been directly affected or not — were the devastating hurricanes, the ongoing war, higher energy costs, rising interest rates and job uncertainty.

Some say they will reduce the amount they spend on themselves so they can give more to help others.

"I bought for myself at Old Navy as opposed to Nordstrom," says Eva Currin of Raleigh, N.C., noting her contributions to the Red Cross and the Humane Society after Hurricane Katrina.

Consumer psychologists say shoppers are likely to attach a little more emotion to gift choices this year.

"The effect of the stress in our society today is going to impact what people buy as they look for something to celebrate, a chance to be happy," says Kit Yarrow, consumer psychologist at Golden Gate University in San Francisco.

In New York City, which draws holiday shoppers from across the nation, spirits were festive and lines were long over the weekend. But from Times Square to Fifth Avenue to 34th Street, shoppers were checking their consciences as well as their gift lists.

The war and storms were on some minds. "You have a guilty feeling when people are giving up lives and are homeless," says Gail Henschel, shopping with Mary Heindel, both of Beaver Dam, Wis. They were at Macy's at 7:30 a.m. Friday to purchase stuffed animals for Henschel's granddaughter.

Job security was an issue for others. Brent Walker and wife Mei Lin, a flight attendant for struggling Delta Air Lines, took a similar reality check while shopping at Toys R Us in Times Square for K'Nex building sets. Rather than buying for each other, they plan to concentrate on gifts, mostly toys, for their 4-year-old son, Noah.

"We are watching our money more than we did in the past," says Walker. "We are definitely bargain shopping."

Consumer experts say gratitude on the part of consumers who haven't been adversely affected by events may encourage them to spend on loved ones — but discourage conspicuous consumption.

"People's mood is to demonstrate comfort and compassion. They aren't going to want to be opulent," says Eugene Muscat, senior associate dean of the University of San Francisco School of Business and Management. "Rather, they want to say, 'We're lucky to be healthy and safe,' and big expensive gifts don't say that."

Joy Tederick, of Woodbine, Md., shopping along Fifth Avenue with her husband and two sons, says the family will curb spending on holiday presents and put the money toward a cruise in July to celebrate a family anniversary. "It doesn't seem fair to spend a lot of money when other people don't have basic needs."

Three families from Jackson, Miss., made the trip to New York. While three of the men in the group of 12 — John Scanlon, Jerry Mills and Stephen Mills — say their spending would go unchanged, Scanlon says the world events "affect your appreciation of what you have."

Despite such sobering thoughts, many shoppers still reveled in the festiveness of the holiday scene.

Alison Bowman, a counselor at a YMCA in Apex, N.C., looks forward to shopping on the post-Thanksgiving weekend with her mom, Gray Roth. While careful about spending, Bowman says the outing lifts her spirits. "It's the music, the decorations, the excitement," she says.

Senior shoppers Jean Fraser and Sarah Leno, of Miami, hit the big New York City department stores — Macy's, Lord & Taylor and Bloomingdale's — for gifts for themselves. And they weren't having second thoughts.

Fraser decided that her grown children would have to forgo presents this year since she had to replace her roof, yanked off by Hurricane Wilma.

"They'll have to suffer a little," Fraser says. "This is all for me."

Contributing: Theresa Howard reported from New York City. Lorrie Grant reported from Cary, N.C.

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