HOLIDAY SHOPPING

  Black Friday hints at a green season

  More spent, but at fewer places, early reads show

***By MARIA HALKIAS***

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     Despite the sluggish economy, more Americans shopped in stores and online over the traditional kickoff weekend to the holiday season, according to initial reads released Sunday. And shoppers are expected to break records again Monday by spending more than $1 billion online.

   Americans spent more but visited fewer stores, which analysts attribute to more focused consumers, who not only did their homework but also had the tools to research in real time.

   Midnight openings also led to fewer store visits per shopper. However, more men and young people — two groups that would rather stay up late than get up early — shopped this Black Friday.        Black Friday sales increased 6.6 percent from a year ago, and the number of shoppers rose 5.1 percent, representing the largest in-store gains since 2007, according to ShopperTrak, which measures traffic in shopping centers and malls.

   Online sales soared 26 percent on the day after Thanksgiving from a year ago to $816 million, making it the biggest online spending day to date this year, comScore Inc. said Sunday. On Thanksgiving Day, usually a lighter day for online shopping, sales over the Internet rose 18 percent from last year to $479 million as retailers offered promotions early on their websites.

   Last year, Cyber Monday — the Monday after the Thanksgiving weekend — was the heaviest day of online spending ever, with sales exceeding $1 billion, according to comScore.

   “We fully expect to see another record set this year,” said comScore chairman Gian Fulgoni.

   Sales are forecast to be up 12 percent.

   A survey released Sunday by the National Retail Federation showed that stores and websites together received a record 226 million shopper visits over the weekend, up from 212 million last year.

   The average holiday shopper spent $398.62 this weekend, up from $365.34 last year. Total spending reached an estimated $52.4 billion, according to a survey conducted by BIGresearch for the retail industry group. (The survey, conducted Thursday through Saturday, has a margin of error of plus or minus 1.6 percent.)

   “Efforts by retailers to reach consumers in multiple ways are really starting to pay off when you see almost 40 percent of dollars spent Thanksgiving weekend coming   online,” said Sherif Mityas, partner in the retail practice of A.T. Kearney. “That would have been unheard of a couple of years ago,”

   Shoppers spent an average of $150.53 online — 37.8 percent of their total weekend spending. That compares with $121.67, or 33.3 percent, during the Thanksgiving weekend last year.

   “With brick-and-mortar retail also reporting strong gains on Black Friday, it’s clear that the heavy promotional activity had a positive impact on both channels,” comScore’s Fulgoni said.

   **Midnight special**

   This year, some of the largest U.S. chains — Best Buy, Kohl’s, Macy’s, Target, Toys R Us and Wal-Mart — were all open for Black Friday sales by midnight on Thanksgiving for the first time. That attracted more shoppers who preferred to stay up late on Thursday rather than getting up early on Friday to shop for door-busters.

   Almost one in four shoppers on Black Friday (24.4 percent) said that at midnight,   they were either in a store or waiting in line to get in, according to the Retail Federation survey. That is up from 9.5 percent in 2010 and 2.2 percent in 2009.

   ShopperTrak said people visited fewer stores per shopping trip, averaging 3.1 this holiday season — down from 3.2 last year.

   “We know shoppers are doing a lot of virtual window-shopping first and deciding what stores to go to instead of wandering from store to store,” said ShopperTrak founder Bill Martin.

   ComScore said 50 million Americans visited online shopping sites on Black Friday, an increase of 35 percent from a year ago. Each of the top five retail sites achieved double-digit gains in visitors compared with last year, led by Amazon. Wal-Mart ranked second, followed by Best Buy, Target and Apple.

    “Amazon.com   once again led the pack, with 50 percent more visitors than any other retailer,” Fulgoni said.

   Even though Thanksgiving weekend numbers were strong, the National Retail Federation continues to forecast   a 2.8 percent increase for the combined November-December holiday shopping season.

   **Forecasts holding**

   Spokeswoman Ellen Davis said the industry group would not re-evaluate its forecast until after the U.S. Commerce Department releases November retail sales on Dec. 13. On Thursday, major U.S. chain stores will report November sales.

   In the past, strong Black Friday results have been followed by weak overall seasons, so analysts aren’t ready to increase their forecasts just yet.

   There’s always a possibility of a drop-off in spending in the coming weeks, Martin said. “Retailers will need to work extra hard to convert knowledgeable browsers into buyers.”

   The slow economic recovery is weighing on the consumer, but the weekend’s numbers so far show “the resiliency of the American consumer,” Mityas said. “Maybe they needed a little shopping therapy … to let loose a little.”



