

Shopping on a smaller scale: Merchants expect consumers to spend smart this year

By Becky Bergman

CHARLOTTE — As local retailers gear up for the holiday shopping season by offering longer hours, deeper discounts and cross-promotions, they say practicality and cautious spending are likely to drive gift-giving this year.

At Renfrow Hardware & General Merchandise in downtown Matthews, owner David Blackley said his most popular items last year included seeds for blueberry bushes and apple trees. He anticipates that practical gift-giving will drive that same trend this season.

“We’re not traditionally a holiday destination, but we have noticed a change over the past few years where people are buying things that are more useful,” he said.

While shoppers may not quite line up outside Blackley’s door on Black Friday for great deals on seedlings, the owner says he has noticed an uptick in foot traffic.

“A lot of people tend to come in closer to the holiday for stocking stuffers, flashlights, batteries, that sort of thing,” he said. “The last-minute items they think of as they’re walking through downtown Christmas shopping.”

The store’s location is a big plus, he said, especially on holiday weekends when people come downtown, park and walk around to shop.

According to a preliminary survey on Black Friday conducted for the National Retail Federation, up to 134 million people are expected to hit the shops this Friday, Saturday or Sunday, higher than the 128 million people who planned to do so last year.

According to the International Council of Shopping Centers, Black Friday was between the fifth and the 10th busiest shopping day of the year from 1993 through 2001.

In 2003 and 2005, the day after Thanksgiving was the busiest shopping day, a ranking typically held by the Saturday before Christmas.

According to the survey, 57 million people will definitely hit the stores while another 77 million will wait to see what retailers have planned before heading out the door.

“Regardless of what we’ve already seen these last few weeks in terms of promotions, retailers still have a few tricks up their sleeves to excite Black Friday shoppers,” said Tracy Mullin, president and CEO of the National Retail Federation.

“With retailers fully aware that shoppers are looking for incredible deals, Americans can expect huge sales on popular items like toys, electronics and apparel,” said Mullin.

Mom-and-pop shops will have to compete with a downturn economy and big-box stores that can afford to slash prices. Even so, retailers like Charlotte’s Green with Envy are betting on cross-promotions, percentage-off specials and even social media to lure in shoppers.

Owner Tina Nardaci says she is optimistic that people are ready to spend, albeit cautiously.

“Even though we don’t know what’s really going on long-term with the economy and things are still uncertain, I think people are happier this year than they were last year and feel more confident spending money on the holidays,” she said. “They are going to be smart, think about what they are buying and maybe not spend as much as they would in the past, but the shoppers are out there.”

To get those shoppers in the door, Nardaci is using colored flyers, a Facebook fan page and minimal print marketing to advertise her longer hours, specials and new product announcements.

Nardaci, who started Green with Envy in Davidson nearly seven years ago and relocated her business to Central Avenue this year, said longer weekend hours and special events have helped attract customers.

This year, the store held a joint holiday open house with a neighboring Chinese restaurant that recently opened.

Internet retailers also are beefing up efforts to draw customers by using social media groups and Cyber Monday sales, according to the National Retail Federation.

Cyber Monday is projected to be a busy day for online retailers, as Black Friday shoppers look online for items they were unable to find on Black Friday.

The foundation found that approximately 87 percent of retailers will offer a Cyber Monday promotion, up from 72 percent in 2007, with promotions ranging from one-day sales to special emails.

A recent study showed that more than 47 percent of online retailers plan to increase their use of social media this holiday season, particularly on Facebook and Twitter.

More than 60 percent said they have already added or improved their Facebook page and nearly 59 percent said they have done the same thing on Twitter.