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THE DAILY NEWS

Rain fails to stifle 'Black Friday' shoppers

By DOUG ROLES
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Overcast, rainy weather did not keep shoppers from turning out in force to local gift shops and retail outlets on the traditional, day-after-Thanksgiving start of the Christmas shopping season.

From jewelry and apparel to furniture and holiday decorations, cashiers were ringing up sales of all sorts of merchandise on the biggest shopping day of the year. Black Friday 2003, unlike last year, came on the heels of reports of a resurgent national economy.

One longtime Huntingdon merchant said the national good news

has given local consumers a shot in the arm and opened wallets.

"I've been busy since 8:30 this morning, non-stop. I haven't let up since," said Jerry Januszewicz, co-owner of Mur Jewelry in downtown Huntingdon.

He's run the 60-year-old jewelry store with wife Dot for 27 years and has seen brisk sales and the more slack times.

When *The Daily News* asked him to sum up "Black Friday," he termed business "very black" and said customers were doing more buying than looking.

"People are in a spending mood this year," he said, noting that busi-

ness seemed to be comparatively "dominant" in recent years.

The Januszewiczs said they spent Friday seeing a lot of "regulars" who hadn't made purchases at the store for some years.

"I think it's going to be a good year and people are feeling good about the economy," said Januszewicz. "I'm all for it."

Marsha Scribner, assistant manager of the recently opened Peable's store in Smithfield Township, said customers there bought "a lot of everything" Friday.

"It was amazing. It was busy. Just very busy," she said. "I was really excited that we had so many people come in."

Scribner said the store did a mix of business, selling Christmas gift items and winter clothing for those preparing for cold weather. Like others who work in area retail businesses, Scribner said shoppers got an early start.

"They were out there," she said of the 7 a.m. store opening. "Huntingdon has been very generous."

A line at the gas pumps at the Martin's General Store along Route 522 in Orbisonia and a steady stream of highway traffic attested to people being out and about on a busy shopping day. Bubba Bauguess, owner of Orbisonia Furniture, located across the street from the gas station, said he had customers looking at recliners, sofas and other merchandise all day long.

"It's been good. We've had a good day," said Bauguess. "I can't complain."

Bauguess, who owns two other stores in Pennsylvania, one in Bedford and one in Milliflinton, said he



Photos by Doug Roles

Charann Foster, Fashion Bug sales associate (and Huntingdon County Dairy Queen), left, Friday assisted customer, Natasha Hoffman of Three Springs, in the selection of a sweater on Black Friday.

enjoys working from his Orbisonia location, which, he said, has set store sales records for the past three months.

"Our business, ever since we've been in Orbisonia, has been good," he said of the furniture outlet that opened three and one-half years ago.

Natasha Hoffman of Three Springs spent Friday shopping at stores across the area. She too said a soggy first day of Christmas shopping didn't keep the crowds at

home. "Stores were busy," she said while shopping for clothes at the Fashion Bug store in Smithfield Township.

Kay Miller, manager of that store, said customers were buying a wide variety of merchandise.

"We've sold a lot of coats today. A lot of sweaters. And also our fine jewelry," said Miller of the store she reported is ranked number 24 of the 1,700 in the chain.

"We've been pretty steady all day," Miller said. "The rain hasn't kept anyone away."

"It's been busy. Busier than a normal Friday," said Tina Krause, a clerk at Appleby's Drug Store in Mount Union. "It was very busy at noon when I came in."

Stephanie Stutz, a clerk at The Bookstore in the Peable's plaza in Smithfield Township, said staffers

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Jim Yocum of Mapleton was in Appleby's Drug Store in Mount Union Friday purchasing holiday items. Store clerk Tina Krause, right, said the gift shop was busy all day.



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working Friday morning at the store saw customers coming in as soon as the store opened for the day. To help the buying along, The Book Store, like many area stores, had a sale scheduled for Friday.

"All the candies are 25 percent off, with our discount card," said Stultz.

Pat's Racing Collectibles near Mount Union put prices down 25 percent to encourage Christmas shopping among racing enthusiasts.

"That will be going on through December," said Earl Smith, who was minding the counter Friday afternoon.

Retail analysts say the big question is whether consumers will keep spending throughout the season.

Last year's holiday sales were mediocre despite strong Thanksgiving weekend sales. Consumers, spooked by the prospect of war in Iraq and a spate of corporate layoffs, delayed the rest of their buying until the very end of the season to get the best bargains. Last holiday season's results were unchanged from 2001.

Across the country merchants were full of good cheer Friday as they got a feel for consumers on the official opening of the holiday shopping season. Early reports from vendors indicate shoppers are buying as least as much as last year, and many are even paying retail.

Early-bird specials on TVs and DVD players and hot toys like Bratz and Barbies wooed many to the nation's malls and stores. But some retail executives said shoppers also were buying regular-priced goods, a

stark difference from last year, when consumers stuck to bargain-hunting.

There were scattered outbreaks of holiday-shopping craziness. When the doors of a Wal-Mart store in Marietta, Ga., opened at 6 a.m., hundreds of people jammed inside, some losing their shoes, others running at full speed with their carts to stake a claim to discounted items.

With the economy on the rebound, the labor market improving and consumer confidence on the rise, merchants like Sears, Roebuck and Co., office supplies retailer Staples, K-B Toys, and several major mall operators reported that traffic and business as of Friday afternoon were at least as healthy as a year ago.

Wally Brewster, a spokesman at General Growth Properties, which owns and manages 166 malls in 39 states, said business Friday was up from a year ago by a percentage in the high single digits.

Michael Niemira, vice president of Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi Ltd., predicted a sales gain of 4.5 percent for the November-December period, the best performance since 1999, when the tally rose 5.4 percent. He based the estimate on sales from stores open at least a year, considered the best indicator of a retailer's health.

The Washington-based National Retail Federation projected total holiday sales to rise 5.7 percent to \$217.4 billion.

(The AP contributed to this report.)

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