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November 21, 2011

ShopperTrak: Dec. 26 Traffic Could Rise 60%

By ARNOLD J. KARR

The calendar — often cited as an excuse for disappointing retail sales — could be the source of a healthy holiday windfall next month.

Christmas falls on a Sunday this year, positioning Dec. 26 on a Monday for the first time since 2005 and for the last time until 2016. ShopperTrak, the Chicago-based firm that measures and projects mall and store foot traffic, estimates that, with schools out and most companies giving employees Monday off, retail traffic could swell as much as 60 percent above levels from the same day last year. If not for the strained state of the U.S. economy, the traffic increase could have been expected to be as high as 67 percent, the company noted.

“Dec. 26 is a very important shopping day as shoppers return unwanted gift items and shop for marked-down merchandise,” said Bill Martin, co-founder of ShopperTrak. “If retailers depend on last year’s shopper turnout and behavior as a guide for staffing and inventory plans, they will lose out on business this year. Dec. 26 is going to be a doorbuster day.”

Christopher Ainsley, president and chief executive officer of the company, said the timing of the holiday aftermath could propel Dec. 26 to be the third biggest shopping day of the year, behind only Black Friday, Nov. 25, and Super Saturday, which will occur on Dec. 17. “Last year, Dec. 26 fell on a Sunday and was the fifth most important shopping day of the year,” he said. “It tends to be a high-traffic day, but this year a number of positive factors are coming together. There are fewer distractions and restrictions — people aren’t going to church or inhibited by early hours or even blue laws like they could be on a Sunday.”

Last year, retail sales for general merchandise, apparel, accessories, furniture and other categories on Dec. 26 reached \$5.69 billion, according to the Commerce Department, while total U.S. shopper traffic for the day topped 189.8 million, according to ShopperTrak data. Shopper traffic is the sum of all stores visits by individual consumers, so a consumer visiting three stores would add three to the total.

Not surprisingly, Ainsley noted, Dec. 26 generates the least amount of traffic when it falls during the middle of the week. Next year, a leap year, it’s pushed to a Wednesday.

He said the calendar scenario also should accelerate the rate of gift card redemptions, but he emphasized that there’s no guarantee that more shoppers automatically will translate into more sales. “Sometimes conversion goes down when traffic moves up,” he said. “If stocks are lean, help is in short supply and there are long waits for service, shoppers get impatient and head back to the car.”

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