

Local retailers see business boom online

BY JENNIFER CURRY

With the number of people purchasing goods online expected to reach record levels this holiday season, local retailers and e-commerce Web developers already are seeing boosts in business.

More than half of all consumers are expected to shop online from work during the busy holiday season, up from about 45 percent last year, according to the National Retail Federation.

On Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving traditionally known for people hitting the stores in search of discounts, the percentage of visitors on 120 selected online retail sites increased 12 percent, rising from 17.2 million visitors last year to 19.2 million this year, according to a survey conducted by Nielsen/NetRatings.

Companies are pulling out all the stops to catch onto this latest shopping trend.

"I think people are becoming aware of the trends," said Tim Sweet, a senior sales consultant at Sewickley-based Nauticom Internet Services who also teaches e-commerce at Grove City College. "More and more, companies with static Web sites are saying, 'I've always wanted to do this.'"

Many local retailers, including American Eagle Outfitters, Dick's Sporting Goods Inc. and General Nutrition Centers Inc., as well as Verizon Wireless, have signed on to a new, one-stop Web site for online shopping that was launched Thanksgiving week by the National Retail Federation. The site, www.cybermonday.com, promotes savings with more than 400 online retailers.

"We try to be wherever we can go," said Laura Merritt, a Verizon Wireless spokeswoman. "It's a good alternative for people who don't necessarily want to hop in a car and go to a store."

In anticipation of the holiday rush, local companies rushed to get Web upgrades completed in time. Strip District-based Albert's Gifts, which sells music gifts and collectibles, scrambled to finish a \$500,000 upgrade by Oct. 15.

Since then, Albert's has seen an increase in the price of average orders, and people are spending more time on the site. The company has exceeded previous years' online sales already, and it expects to see online sales increase by 20 percent to 25 percent this holiday season compared with last year, according to COO Joe Sasala.

Dick's Sporting Goods, based

in Findlay, also launched a new Web site in advance of the holiday season. The retailer has seen substantial growth in its online sales each year and expects the trend to continue. (It doesn't, however, provide a breakdown of online versus in-store sales.)

"The holiday season is a very important season both for the stores and online," said spokesman Jeff Hennion. "We expect this year to be a very strong year when it comes to sales both in the stores and online."

Local companies already have seen strong online sales growth this year. American Eagle Outfitters, based in Warrendale, has seen online sales grow at a rate of 40 percent year-over-year, according to spokeswoman Jani Strand.

And John Brodak, president of Carmichaels, Pa.-based Brodak Manufacturing Co., which manufacturers control line model airplanes, said business has been up between 20 percent and 30 percent this year from last year. The company now sells about 30 percent of its airplanes online, compared to 10 percent four years ago. He added that people are shopping more online because it takes less time.

"Even my son bought a Christmas tree on the Internet," he said.



JOE WUJICK

Employee Richard Czado packs an order at Albert's Gifts. The retailer's online sales have increased since it upgraded its Web site.

With more customers shopping online, businesses are turning to Web development and software firms to help create the Web sites.

Tarentum-based 2440 Media Inc. has seen the number of customers for which it is developing e-commerce Web sites jump from two or three at any given time a year ago to between five and 10 at any given time this fall, accord-

ing to president Bob Kruse.

"Medium-sized businesses are just catching on," Kruse said.

Nauticom has seen the percentage of Web services related to e-commerce it offers rise 20 percent between 2004 and 2005, and Sweet expects that it will rise an additional 10 percent in 2006.