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Getting ready for 'Cyber Monday'

Despite projected drop in Web holiday sales, sites may be busy with lookers

By **Suzanne Choney**

msnbc.com

updated 1:49 p.m. ET, Fri., Nov. 28, 2008

This holiday season is likely to be the worst for online shopping since it started a decade or so ago. But that doesn't mean you won't face delays or slowdowns at retail [Web sites](#) on Cyber Monday, or in the weeks ahead when online shopping intensifies.

There are free services available to help make Web shopping more efficient, and some of them, like retailers themselves, will be coming at you through your mobile phone or social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook.

"Mobile and social networks will play a more prominent role in e-commerce this season than ever before," said Evan Schuman, editor of **StorefrontBacktalk.com**, an online retail technology news site.

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In fact, Schuman and his team of reporters plan to Twitter the season away, using the micro-blogging site to give shoppers "traffic reports" of a sort, letting them know what technical slowdowns or meltdowns are happening on retail sites. They'll be gathering that information, in



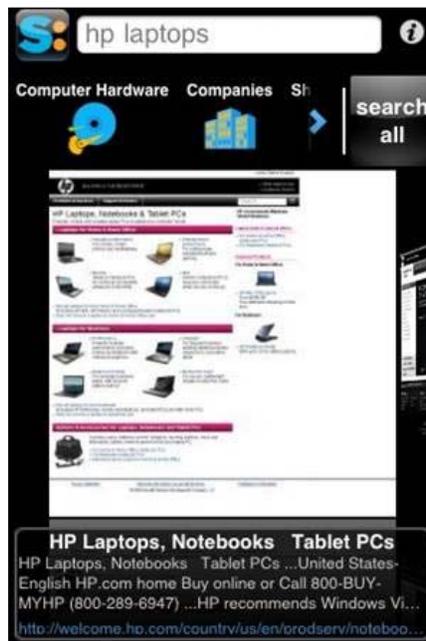
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part, from companies that track Web site performance.

You can be Twittered endlessly in a crossfire of messages and alerts from both retailers and those trying to help you through the shopping maze. And then there are these sites:

- [Searchme.com](#) uses a search engine that lets you



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Searchme, Inc.

Searchme visual search engine works on the iPhone as well as other mobile devices. It provides results as a browsable list of Web pages that users can check out before visiting a site.

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browse photos of Web pages with the goods you want, letting you preview the site before you actually visit it. It can be accessed on the Web, and there's also a mobile service for [cell phone](#) users, including a program for the iPhone.

- **Shopittome.com** asks you for your favorite clothing brands, such as Juicy Couture or Ella Moss, then looks at leading retail Web sites for what you want and can e-mail you daily telling you which items are on sale.
- **CheapTweet.com** is a Twitter-based site that "brings together retailers' posts on Twitter and consumers looking for good deals," according to a company spokeswoman.

That's a lot of shopping help for an economy in a slump.

Marketing research firm comScore, Inc., recently forecast holiday online retail spending for November and December as "flat" compared to last year, "significantly lower than last year's growth rate of 19 percent."

"It really is unprecedented. This year is different than any other year we've seen in the online holiday season," said Andrew Lipsman, comScore senior manager for industry analysis.

Web site traffic could get busy

Yet, while many of us may not be buying, or buying much, we will be looking and hunting for bargains, or just to make sure we really did get that fleece throw at the lowest possible price.

"I'm not sure that consumers cutting back on their spending will actually represent any less traffic on some of these Web sites," said Kurt Peters, editor-in-chief of Internet Retailer, a trade publication.

"Consumers might be going online this year even more to compare and shop, so retailers need to be prepared for volume. Whether that volume translates into sales, we won't know just yet. But consumers will certainly be online doing their shopping."

Yahoo says it's ready, especially after last year's Cyber Monday fiasco. The company's checkout services for tens of thousands of online merchants was out of commission from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. that day, with other site problems continuing until nearly 6 p.m.

Video



Launch

Online retailers anticipate Cyber Monday

Nov. 28: While traditional retailers are hoping to cash in on Black Friday, internet stores are launching their best deals on Cyber Monday. PC Mike Wendland reports

NBC News Channel

Jason Khoury of Yahoo said last year's meltdown was the result of a "[network configuration](#) issue" tied to the company addition of new servers.

"Once we resolved the issue, we did not experience any disruptions for the remainder of the 2007 shopping season," he said.

This year, he said, the company has increased server capacity for Yahoo Small Business, "and has vigorously tested those servers — and increased our staffing and monitoring capabilities to ensure we are prepared to support our merchant partners as they service holiday shoppers."

Being prepared is key, even if the season is slower for sales, but heavier for browsers (as in the human variety), said Schuman.

"Last year, the typical consumer, with a shopping list of maybe 15 items, probably visited anywhere from 20 to 23 Web sites to find those items. So that's a little comparison-shopping, but not much.

"This year, we'll probably see a consumer visit closer to 40 to 45 sites

to purchase those same 15 items," he said. "You go to one site, yeah, there's a good price, but is it worth it for you to visit a few more sites? Probably."

Shop in the off-peak hours

It may help to do online shopping in the "off-peak hours" of early morning, mid-afternoon and late in the evening, said Peters of Internet Retailer.

While the Internet is "open" 24/7, Web sites can face the same crush of customers at the same times of day that brick-and-mortar stores do, he said.

This year, 55.8 percent of those with Internet access at work will be holiday shopping from their desks, likely during their lunch hours, according to the National Retail Federation.

In 2005, the trade association created "Cyber Monday," the first workday after Thanksgiving, and two years ago started CyberMonday.com to promote specials and spur online shopping.

But Cyber Monday isn't the busiest online shopping day of the season.

"It really ranks about fourth or fifth," said Peters of Internet Retailer. "Usually Dec. 12 to 15 are the heaviest days," and this year, Dec. 15 may be the peak day.

Why? "It's partly just people procrastinating," he said. "And, as people have become more comfortable shopping online, knowing they'll get their products delivered in time, that date has moved back. Years ago, it was around Dec. 7 or 8."

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"One of the things we saw last year was that consumers were a bit more savvy, and accelerated their spending later in the season to take advantage of late-season price discounting," said Lipsman of comScore.

"It would be reasonable to conclude that this may be even more likely to occur this year, given the increasingly tight economy."

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