

# Retailers don't use traditional calendar for pushing holiday goods

By McClatchy Newspapers

September had barely started, but that didn't stop retailers from talking Christmas: Wal-Mart said it would begin its holiday-layaway promotion just two weeks after Labor Day – a full month early. A few days later, Toys R Us and Kmart said they'd do away with layaway fees altogether.

One might say they were late to the holiday party. A Neiman Marcus in Oak Brook, Ill., debuted a decked-out display of Christmas trees, collectibles and holiday decor in August.

Fretting that an upcoming presidential election, rising energy and food costs as well as ongoing job fears could cause skittish consumers to tighten their purse strings, retailers are drumming up ways to persuade them to shop early and often.

They'll spend the next few months vying for shoppers' attention and dollars, aiming to drive all-important holiday sales, which make up roughly 25 percent of their yearly profits, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers.

By starting promotions while it's still hot outside, retailers are making a calculated move to stay in front of consumers and lock in their loyalty early, say retail experts. Early estimates from ShopperTrak predict a 3.3 percent gain this year from last. Foot traffic in stores, which was down last year, is expected to pick up 2.8 percent.

That's a brighter forecast than the 3 percent gain predicted for the last year's holiday-shopping season, which ended up as

a mixed bag for retailers. Many scratched out sales gains of 3.4 percent year-over-year, according to Thomson Reuters, but that was bolstered by deep discounts. By comparison, in 2010, retailers realized same-store sales gains of 4 percent.

If consumers start spending earlier, they're more likely to spend more and buy more if they aren't rushed by a holiday deadline, added Edward Fox, associate professor of marketing at Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business in Dallas.

But that's one big if.

Overall, retail sales this year have been bumpy. Consumer confidence has been low and employment gains uneven. Robust back-to-school sales, however, gave a number of retailers a boost, with a nearly 6 percent gain in August, according to research firm Retail Metrics.

Working in retailers' favor is that they'll have more time this year to complete sales. This year, the calendar dictates that the holiday-shopping season will last five weeks, instead of the typical four.

Analysts also are betting on an uptick in online shopping this year, namely in electronics and appliances, as shoppers continue "showrooming" – browsing retailers' brick-and-mortar stores for items and then searching online for the best deal.