

## Shopping with hashtags: Good deals found by pounding the pavement but by # as well

By Lisa Eckelbecker TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
[lisa.eckelbecker@telegram.com](mailto:lisa.eckelbecker@telegram.com)

AUBURN — Christmas carols sounded from hidden speakers, and garlands hung from rafters, as Jordan King and Chelsea Jezerski toted bags of purchases through the Auburn Mall last week.

Clutched in their hands were their not-so-secret guides to sales, deals and promotions: smartphones loaded with social media apps.

"Every time that there's a sale, you will see it on Twitter or any social media," said Ms. Jezerski, 19, of Webster.

"Sometimes, I even post, 'I just bought this and this for this much money,'" said Ms. King, 20, also of Webster.

Many retailers long ago staked out turf in the whirling dervish of Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and other online networks, but the coming holiday season may be a leap forward for social media and shopping, thanks to the practices of consumers such as Ms. Jezerski and Ms. King.

Forty-nine percent of Boston-area consumers surveyed by the accounting and consulting firm Deloitte said they planned to use social media to assist them with their holiday shopping this year.

That suggests more shoppers could be tapping into social networks to read reviews and get discount codes to aide their shopping, according to Kate Ferrara, principal and leader of the New England retail practice for Deloitte. There's even a word for this online prepping that leads to purchases in bricks-and-mortar stores: webrooming.

"People aren't just going online or using the internet to make the purchase," Ms. Ferrara said. "There's a big trend toward social media for this browsing."

The National Retail Federation is forecasting that retail sales during November and December will hit \$616.9 billion this year, up a moderate 4.1 percent over the same period last year. The Retailers Association of Massachusetts, a trade group that represents mostly smaller retailers, expects to project more modest sales growth when it releases its state forecast Nov. 20.

Retailers hungry for those revenues know that social media will be a force during the holiday season, according to Matthew S. Ong, senior retail analyst with NerdWallet Inc., which operates the personal finance website NerdWallet.com.

"The pie of retail sales has not been growing really fast, so that means retailers are looking to cannibalize each other's sales," Mr. Ong said. "One of the best ways to do that is really create a lot of brand loyalty, and create those repeat shoppers that invest in your store and not only invest in your store, but become your own brand spokespersons. One of the ways shoppers do that is over social media."

In the Worcester area, the Solomon Pond Mall of Marlboro and the Auburn Mall, both owned by the Indianapolis-based mall operator Simon Property Group Inc., have Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts.

"We're posting everything on there, from store deals and promotions to events, letting customers know what's coming up," said Chris Bastien, general manager of the Auburn Mall.

The power of social media was clear to Sheila Hennessy, director of marketing and business development for the Solomon Pond Mall, during Black Friday shopping last year. At one point, she saw numerous shoppers toting purchases from Hollister and

Abercrombie & Fitch, casual apparel stores favored by younger shoppers.

"I stopped and talked to the shoppers, and they said, 'Oh, yeah. We got a tweet at 10 p.m. on Thanksgiving letting us know what the deals were,'" she said.

Big Lots Stores Inc. of Columbus, Ohio, which has a Big Lots store at the Greendale Mall in Worcester, has stepped up its use of social media in the last year with content created for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and a recently launched Pinterest account.

Andrew Stein, Big Lots chief customer officer, said the company knows its target shopper has a smartphone and is on social media, and it wants to engage her. The company is also promoting the use of the Twitter hashtag #nailedthis.

"We know our customer," Mr. Stein said. "She talks like this. She's going to nail it for her family and friends."

Not all retailers have embraced social media. Jon B. Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts, said some of the association's members have been slow to sign on. The association urges its members to at least get on Facebook.

"Most, I think, have finally gotten the word that they need to be in the social media game, at least do that, even if you haven't gotten into mobile apps," Mr. Hurst said. "It's got a low-cost to no-cost (entry) and it's an important part of their advertising future and practices."

Vaillancourt Folk Art, a maker of hand-painted chalkware figurines that operates out of a studio in Sutton, initially found its social media efforts getting little response because its core customers were older than the consumers typically using social media, said Luke M. Vaillancourt, director of digital marketing.

But that is changing. A 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center showed 45 percent of adults age 65 and older who were online were also on Facebook, up from 35 percent just one year earlier.

The same survey found that 60 percent of adults online age 50 to 64 were on Facebook, and 79 percent of those age 30 to 49 were signed up for the network. Younger consumers may have grown up with social media, but older consumers have increasingly signed on, too.

"The demographics of our customer is now reaching the demographics of the active Facebook user," Mr. Vaillancourt said.

Vaillancourt now uses its social media channels for behind-the-scenes peeks of work in the studio, holiday decorating at the store's 12,000-square-foot gallery and merchandise headed for retailers such as Neiman Marcus.

"The biggest thing to understand with social media is it's fluid," Mr. Vaillancourt said. "You can tweet one thing and get no response. You can tweet it the next week and get an endorsement from a big celebrity."

Mr. Ong, of NerdWallet, said he expects to see more creativity from retailers on social media this holiday season, maybe more use of Vine, a service that allows users to share six-second looping videos.

Consumers think of shopping and social media as a fun combination, and so should retailers, according to Mr. Ong of NerdWallet.

"They don't want to be sold to," he said of shoppers. "They want to be part of the experience."

Contact Lisa Eckelbecker at [lisa.eckelbecker@telegram.com](mailto:lisa.eckelbecker@telegram.com). Follow her on Twitter @LisaEckelbecker.

---

Order the Telegram & Gazette, delivered daily to your home or office! [www.telegram.com/homedelivery](http://www.telegram.com/homedelivery)

---

Copyright 2014 Worcester Telegram & Gazette Corp.