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Buying, Selling and Twittering All the Way

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Once upon a time, people mailed their holiday wishes to the North Pole and hoped for a reply on Christmas Day. Nowadays they are sending their wishes into cyberspace and are apt to get a reply in minutes.

America's first Twitter Christmas got under way in earnest on Friday. Across the land, retailers and their customers used the social networking site to talk to one another about bargains, problems, purchases and shopping strategies.

After buying a new navigation system at 6 a.m. on the most frenzied shopping day of the year, Laura S. Kern of Los Angeles could not figure out why it was not giving her traffic updates. She sent a message to Best Buy's Twitter account and within five minutes not one, but two Best Buy employees responded with fix-it advice.

In Bloomington, Minn., Mall of America used its Twitter page to tell consumers two of its parking areas were at capacity and that their best bet was to park near Ikea.

Twitter permits public communication via short, to-the-point messages. Many people use it to send mundane updates to their friends, but increasingly, the nation's retailers see it as a business tool.

It gives customers a practical way to cajole a retailer, complain about something or ask questions.

A Twitter post can in theory be seen by millions, and thus packs more punch than an e-mail message or a phone call to a store. The big retailers are all scrambling this Christmas to come up with Twitter plans. They are designating tech-savvy employees to respond to the posts, sometimes by providing up-to-minute inventory information from a sales floor, for example, or by offering help with some balky gadget.

“It's one of the greatest emerging communication channels out there,” said Greg Ahearn, senior vice president of marketing and e-commerce for Toys "R" Us. “This is a way people can stay connected with the brand in a way they've never been able to before.”

So far this shopping weekend, special deals have been posted on Twitter from stores as varied as Best Buy, J.C. Penney, Toys "R" Us, Staples, Gap, Bloomingdale's and Barneys.

For the uninitiated, Twitter.com is a Web site where each member has a password-protected page. It has a blank box for typing in a message of 140 characters or fewer, an act known as tweeting.

To see a retailer's messages, Twitter users “follow” the retailer, which means that the chain's posts show up on their Twitter home page when they log in. And the system allows users to send messages in the other
direction, so that a retailer’s employees will see them.

“I think in this economy you need to leverage every asset that you have,” said James Fielding, president of Disney Stores Worldwide, who sends messages under the Twitter name, or handle, DisneyStorePrez.

On Friday morning, as consumers flooded Disney Stores around the country, Mr. Fielding messaged: “We have amazing ONE DAY ONLY deals previewing on our Facebook page — become a fan today and find out more!”

Retailers hope that if they send Twitter messages, consumers will come. About 47 percent of retailers said they would increase their use of social media this holiday season, according to a study by Shop.org, part of the National Retail Federation, an industry group. And more than half of retailers said they added or improved their Facebook and Twitter pages. There are advantages for consumers too, like discounts. For instance, those who decided to follow Gap Outlet received an offer for 15 percent off purchases of $75 or more.

As shoppers jammed the aisles on Friday at a Best Buy store in Arlington Heights, Ill., an employee, Jerry DeFrancisco, went up to a computer kiosk and used his Twitter account to tell customers about Best Buy’s home theater deals. Then he resumed his in-store duties, helping a customer decipher a sales circular.

A few months ago, Best Buy began piloting a Twelpforce — a Twitter-inspired play on “help force” — of some 2,500 employees that answer consumers’ questions in real time.

“It’s 24-hour access to our employees,” said Brad Smith, director of interactive marketing and emerging media for Best Buy. The Twelpforce had fielded about 25,000 questions even before gearing up for Thanksgiving weekend.

Ms. Kern in Los Angeles used the service on Friday. After she could not get her new navigation system to work, she tried Best Buy’s telephone support line, only to receive a warning that her wait would be an hour. So she posted on Twitter instead, and within minutes, Best Buy employees were sending her useful links and details about her gadget. “It’s amazing,” she said later in the day. (Her interaction with the employees ultimately helped her realize she would need to go back to the store for help.)

Many retailers will be posting to their Twitter pages throughout the weekend and the entire holiday season. Some chains have an official Twitter account. Others have many, like one for each store, or one for each employee who wants to post messages. There are Twitter pages for designers, like Nicole Miller and Diane von Furstenberg.

Retailers also use Facebook to interact with their customers. But Facebook, with its photo albums and various applications, does not have the same no-frills immediacy as Twitter — which is why Twitter is ideal for instantaneously announcing sales.

In addition to bargains, stores are also using Facebook and Twitter to promote contests and games that they hope will keep consumers engaged and coming back. Best Buy has an interactive Secret Santa application on its Facebook page. Gap is using Twitter to inform New York City residents and visitors where its “Gap Cheer” bus (filled with dancers and drummers) will be parked and giving away sweaters and jeans.
Of course, sometimes retailers simply use their Twitter posts to capture the spirit of the season. At 3:30 Thursday morning, an employee posted seven words on the Macy's Twitter page, about a marching band that was practicing hours before the chain's Thanksgiving day parade.

It said: “Is he really running with a tuba?”