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**RETAILING:** And many happy returns  
Consumers seeking deals out in force at stores, malls  
By HUBBLE SMITH

Packed with merchandise, Juana Martinez stood in line with about 30 other people at the Centennial Center Kohl's department store Wednesday to return gifts and take advantage of after-Christmas sales.

She held a canister set and decorations for her new house along with some apparel items that were marked 50 percent off. Martinez' mother stood behind her with a pillow, a vase and artwork.

"You have to go ahead and support the economy and keep people employed," she said. "I'm not worried about spending. That's why we buy after Christmas, to get deals."

Retailers are looking for more consumers with that attitude. A weak housing market, combined with the current credit crunch, presented a challenging holiday season.

The National Retail Federation had forecast that holiday shopping sales would increase 4 percent this year to \$474.5 billion.

"I guess we'll know in a couple of weeks when the dust settles," economist [John Restrepo](#) of Las Vegas-based [Restrepo Consulting Group](#) said. "I think people are being conservative now. They're a bit nervous about what's going on right now."

Overall, personal consumption expenditures have increased 2 percent to 3 percent annually in the past few years, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Consumer confidence has dropped and people are concerned about rising fuel prices, University of Nevada, Las Vegas economics professor Keith Schwer said at his annual economic outlook. A perceived loss in home equity and a high concentration of subprime mortgages in Las Vegas presents a "mixed picture" of current indicators, he said.

Martinez, who moved to Las Vegas seven months ago from California, said she's going to be a "smart shopper" in 2008.

"I'm going to try to cut down on spending, just buy the things I need instead of the things I want," she said.

Every year Las Vegan Joi Warburton says she's not going to spend as much during the holidays.

"Holidays and vacations, you end up spending more than you want, but you work hard all year, you've got to have some fun," Warburton said while shopping for Christmas items that were discounted 70 percent at Kohl's.

"I think consumers are more careful because of the economy. We try to be careful all year, but then Christmas comes and it changes," Warburton added.

[Restrepo](#) said the issue right now is what's happening in the credit market and how deep the foreclosure numbers continue to run.

"It could be an uncomfortable year in terms of consumers taking on debt," he said. "We seem to be going into a national recession. There are signs out there. The question is can consumers spend their way out of the recession. A lot of it is how wealthy do consumers feel."

Kohl's spokeswoman Elizabeth DeLuca on Wednesday said stores have been busy throughout the shopping season, from the 250 early-bird specials on Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, through the "night owl" specials in the days before Christmas.

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