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Web Traffic Snarls Sites on Black Friday

By Evan Schuman

November 25, 2007

Lowe's, Macy's, Victoria's Secret and others are hit hardest where it hurts—in the transaction times.

A surge of e-commerce traffic on Thanksgiving night and all day Friday apparently caught several retail giants by surprise, with Lowe's, Macy's and Victoria's Secret especially hard hit.

But they were far from the exception, as almost a third of leading retailers suffered significant slowdowns on Black Friday, according to statistics released this weekend by Keynote Competitive Research, a firm that tracks Web site performance.

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Many retailers count on Black Friday to turn their red ink black, but the fact that most slowdowns occurred during the transaction phase of the interactions may have reduced that salvaging effect considerably.

Shawn White, Keynote's director of external operations, said the slowdowns "impacted the product search and check-out processes—and presumably will impact online sales."

The Keynote study added that "the worst performing sites on Black Friday were showing as much as a 400 percent slowdown," which White said "will lead to consumers abandoning a product search or checkout."

Macy's, for example, saw site performance fall off from its typical 12 seconds to about 15 to 20 seconds. "But it's not happening on their homepage," White said. "It's happening when [site visitors] are actually searching the site."

Among some of the other hardest hit e-tailers were Lowe's—which saw a roughly "300 percent decrease in performance," White said. Site performance "used to be 100 percent [rapid response], but it's now fluctuating between 20 percent and 30 percent."

OfficeDepot went from 10 seconds to 25 seconds. Buy.com and Borders also suffered significant slowdowns, White said.

High-tech marketing marks Black Friday and Cyber Monday. Click here to read more.

White noted that, in general, homepage performances were good, but that delays crept in later in the purchase process, typically when the site visit moved from product description pages to either search or checkout. That is when sites move transactions to other servers and—quite often—to other sites entirely.

Indeed, some performance degradations may not be the direct fault of the retail site. But White said that major retailers can and should "put pressure on suppliers [and] partners" to optimize their own systems. He added that SLAs (service-level agreements) should include guaranteed response times during holidays and other anticipated high-traffic periods.

A site slowdown—as opposed to an outright outage—can be especially frustrating because steady—and oftentimes sharply rising—sales camouflage the problem. In the end, many executives are left wondering how many *additional* sales they might have made had the site responded normally.

How long is too long for a site to respond to a mouse click? That depends on the individual shopper and that shopper's patience. White cited the popular 8-second rule, but said that many factors influence how lenient shoppers will be.

Consumers may be willing to wait longer for exclusive products or information,



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such as the balance of their bank accounts.

Consumers might also be more patient with a graphic-intensive site that has images they truly want to see. Victoria's Secret, for example, experienced a huge slowdown Thursday night—from a 5-second response to a 15-second response—but White speculated that its customers might be more tolerant of delays because they're expecting a more graphic-intensive experience, and the delay is thus worth waiting through.



Predictions for retail generally suggest that 2007 will have one of the weakest years in terms of sales growth since 2002, the worst of the dot-com implosion years.

But the National Retail Federation on Sunday predicted that Monday will show a sharp increase, with "72 million consumers planning to shop online from home or at work tomorrow, up from 60.7 million in 2006 and 59.0 million in 2005." The NRF survey found that 31.9 percent of adults will shop on Cyber Monday, up 17.3 percent over last year.

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