

Business

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Merchants make matches to sweeten Valentine's Day

Their shoppers struggling, retailers go the extra mile

BY DON MANLEY

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Retailers of flowers, jewelry and chocolates say people already are spending on Valentine's Day, despite the struggling economy.

But many are spending less and a great many people are waiting — as usual — until the last minute.

Retailers in Lee are offering special deals, suggesting lower-cost alternatives or even negotiating on price.

And because Valentine's Day falls on a Sunday, some are extending their hours or opening on Sunday even though they normally are closed that day.

"The bottom line is what happens a few days prior to Valentine's Day," said Nicole Mastmeier, co-owner of Blue Diamond Jewelers in the Coconut Point mall in Estero.

Nationally, Valentine's sales are expected to decline compared to 2009. The retail industry research firm IBISWorld predicts spending on flowers will be \$1.4 billion, down 4.9 percent, and candy sales will fall 1.3 percent this year.

VALENTINES

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Marilyn Walter, a designer at Bumble Bee's Florist And Gift Shop in Cape Coral. That makes the holiday less hectic for staff and also helps ensure the store doesn't order too few or too many flowers, she added.

Some stores will have extended hours for the holiday, including Norman Love Confections in south Fort Myers. The store will be open Sunday for the first time, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

In the past, the last few days before the holiday have been so busy that off-duty police officers have been needed to direct parking lot traffic, said the business' owner, Norman Love.

Love's Valentine's Day sales have spiked this year thanks to a 400 percent jump in Internet sales compared to 2009, thanks to a new Web site and expanded marketing.

FACTS ABOUT VALENTINE'S DAY

Top ways to celebrate by household participation rate:

- Greeting cards, 65 percent
- Date night, 44 percent
- Candy, 38 percent
- Flowers, 32 percent
- Gift cards, 29 percent
- Stuffed animal, 21 percent
- Other gifts, 17 percent
- Perfume, cologne, 12 percent
- Jewelry, 11 percent

By the numbers

180 million — Number of

Valentine's Day cards exchanged each year

50 percent — Proportion of cards bought in the six days leading up to the big day

40 percent — Proportion of purchases which parents account for

\$3.27 — Average spent per person on family pet on Valentine's Day, up from \$2.17 last year

Sources: Hallmark/Retail Industry Leaders Association/NRF